THE SCAMP FAMILY

L.T. MEADE

-A.T.S-

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/scampfamily0000ltme

'Oh, I am glad I am your queen!' continued Snowball; 'and—and,' she added, 'I love you all.'

S. F.

THE SCAMP FAMILY

By

L. T. MEADE

Author of
'A Girl from America,' 'Children of Wilton Chase,'
'Three Girls from School,' 'Sue,' 'A Bevy
of Girls,' 'The Manor School,' &c.

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS
by
A. Talbot Smith

LONDON: 47 Paternoster Row
W. & R. CHAMBERS, LIMITED
EDINBURGH: 339 High Street
1907

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	OVER THE GARDEN WALL	1
II.	SNOWBALL	12
III.	'THREE BLIND MICE'	22
IV.	PICNIC TEA	29
V.	UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL	42
VI.	MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE	61
VII.	GONE!	77
VIII.	TO SAVE SNOWBALL	82
IX.	ATONEMENT	102
X.	WISE COUNSELS	112
XI.	A MOTHERLY PROPOSAL	119
XII.	MONEY NO OBSTACLE	137
XIII.	SHOPPING	146
XIV.	FROM SUMMER TO WINTER	169
XV.	DANGERS OF FOG	198
XVI.	AN ANGEL	217
XVII.	BLIND JOE	225
XVIII.	BLACK EYES	249
XIX.	A GOLDEN DAY	268
XX.	PALACE BEAUTIFUL	281
XXI.	PREPARING THE FESTIVAL	294
XXII.	WEST END AND EAST END CLASP HANDS	312

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

PAGE

'Oh, I am glad I am your queen!' continued Snowball; 'and—and,' she added, 'I love you all' *Frontispiece*

'I say, stop that!' cried Baby 9

On that hand he inflicted ten very sharp cuts of the cane 109

'What did madam require?' 152

They were penniless little girls, absolutely lost in the middle of a London fog! 197

'Oh! am I safe?' cried Snowball 220

'She has been eavesdropping, madam!' 246

'Oh, my!' said Magenta Anne. 'Ain't yer a cruel boy!' 306

BOOKS BY Mrs L. T. MEADE.

A Girl from America. Ten Illustrations by Lewis Baumer.....6/-
The Hill-Top Girl. Ten Illustrations by Lewis Baumer.....6/-
A Bevy of Girls. Ten Illustrations by Lewis Baumer.....6/-
The Girls of Mrs Pritchard's School. Ten Illustrations by Lewis Baumer..6/-
The Manor School: A Girl's Story. Ten Illustrations by Lewis Baumer...6/-
Girls of the Forest. Ten Illustrations by Percy Tarrant.....6/-
Girls of the True Blue. Ten Illustrations by Percy Tarrant.....6/-
Seven Maids. Illustrated by Percy Tarrant. Gilt edges.....6/-
The Odds and the Evens. Illustrated by Percy Tarrant. Gilt edges.....6/-
Three Girls from School. Eight Illustrations by Percy Tarrant.....5/-
Turquoise and Ruby. Eight Illustrations.....5/-
Wilful Cousin Kate. Eight Illustrations by W. Rainey.....5/-
A Modern Tomboy. Eight Illustrations by Percy Tarrant.....5/-
A Gay Charmer. Eight Illustrations by W. H. C. Groome.....5/-
The Rebel of the School. Eight Illustrations by W. Rainey.....5/-
A Very Naughty Girl. Eight Illustrations by W. Rainey.....5/-
Miss Nonentity. Illustrated by W. Rainey.....5/-
Light o' the Morning. Eight Illustrations by W. Rainey.....5/-
The Girls of St Wode's. Eight Illustrations by W. Rainey.....5/-
Wild Kitty. Eight Illustrations by J. Ayton Symington.....5/-
Catalina. Eight Illustrations by W. Boucher.....5/-
Girls New and Old. Illustrated by J. Williamson.....5/-
Betty: A School-Girl. Illustrated by Everard Hopkins.....5/-
The Scamp Family. Eight Illustrations by A. Talbot Smith.....3/6
Sue. Six Illustrations.....3/6
Dumps: A Plain Girl. Six Illustrations by R. Lillie.....3/6
Petronella; and The Coming of Polly. Six Illustrations by W. Rainey..3/6
Peter the Pilgrim. Six Illustrations by Harold Copping.....3/6
Queen Rose. Six Illustrations by J. T. Murray.....3/6
Cosey Corner; or, How they kept a Farm. Eighteen Illus. by P. Tarrant..3/6
Four on an Island. Illustrated by W. Rainey.....3/6
The Children of Wilton Chase. Illustrated by E. Hopkins.....3/6
Playmates. Six Illustrations by G. Nicolet.....2/6
The Squire's Little Girl.....1/-
Little Mary, and other Stories. Illustrated.....1/-
A Farthingful. Illustrated.....6d.
Poor Miss Carolina. Illustrated.....6d.
The Golden Lady. Illustrated.....6d.
Cassie and Little Mary. Illustrated.....6d.
A Lonely Puppy. Illustrated.....6d.
Dickory Dock. Illustrated.....6d.

W. & R. Chambers, Limited, London and Edinburgh.

The Scamp Family.

CHAPTER I.

OVER THE GARDEN WALL.

'COME right away this minute, Baby; Jackdaw and I can't wait! If you don't choose to come, we're off—that's all.'

A tall girl of a little over twelve years of age roused herself from a book in which she had been absorbed. She was lying under a great oak-tree. Her short skirts came barely down to a little below her knees; her stockings were somewhat untidy; a shock of dark hair fell over her shoulders and partly concealed her face, which was plump and dimpled, the features being somewhat irregular, but the eyes large, of a clear gray, and particularly frank in expression.

'Baby! Baby!' cried the voice which had roused the girl from her recumbent position. 'Jackdaw is going mad—you'd best hurry up.'

'Coming—all in good time; don't shout so,' said Muriel Messager. 'What are you up to now, Patch? I do wish you and Jackdaw would sometimes let me read in peace.'

A girl—in all respects the opposite to her sister—came forward. She had a dainty face, although not very pretty. In the presence of the redoubtable Baby, she looked neat, clean, and bubbling over with fun.

'There,' she cried, making a quick move, 'I've got hold of that horrid old book!' She flung *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to the other side of the garden. 'We must wake Baby up, Jackdaw,' she said to her brother—a boy of nine, with tightly curling hair and much the same gray eyes as characterised Baby's face.

Muriel sat up.

'I am a giant, and you are two pygmies,' she said. 'To think that I am only barely a year older than you, Patch! Why, I could swallow you and Jackdaw up if I liked!'

'But you won't—there's a dear old Baby!' said Patch. 'Oh, we've got *such* news!'

'What?' asked Baby, her eyes beginning to sparkle.

'Mother's gone away for the day, and there's a telegram from father to say he won't be back until to-morrow, and Miss Peters has a headache and is lying down, so we can do what we like!'

'Well, it's too hot to do much,' said Baby, glancing across the sunlit garden, and wishing that she might have her book back again.

'It is nothing of the kind,' answered Patch.

'Listen—you must listen. We want to go and see the Scamp Family.'

'Nonsense!' cried Baby. 'They'——

'They live at the Moat House. Every one says they're the most awful children in the world. I couldn't sleep last night thinking about them.'

'Nor I,' said Jackdaw. 'There are four of 'em. They climb trees, sail boats in the pond and tumble in after them and nearly get drowned, and they always look beautiful and unreputable. There's a boy called Roger, and another Dandy. Roger has a cut across his temple. He got that by falling off a tree right on to a bit of iron. I wish I had a cut on my forehead.'

'You *are* a goose,' said Baby.

'Come, Muriel, suppose we don't call you Baby; suppose we call you Muriel. Then you'll come and see the Scamp Family?' said Patch.

'But I don't want to; mother wouldn't like us to be naughty.'

'Mother's away—she'll never know,' said Jackdaw.

'Oh!' cried Baby.

Patch began to stretch herself.

'I'm just sick of every single thing that we do when we are left to ourselves,' was her remark. 'I want to have a great big glorious bit of naughtiness. I don't mind if I have to repent afterwards and have a punishment. I do so desperately, badly, want to be naughty.'

'And so do I,' cried Jackdaw; 'and I want to be naughty to-day, and with the Scamp Family. Come, Babs—do come; you'll enjoy it as much as we shall.'

Babs considered. They had never been told not to visit the Scamp Family, but they all of them had a conviction that it was slightly irregular and slightly improper. The fascination of doing irregular and naughty things began to possess them.

'There's no one ever to tell on us,' said Patch the tempter.

'How long will it take?' asked Babs.

'Oh, not at all special long,' began Jackdaw.

'How will we get there?' asked Babs.

'Walk along by the garden wall; their garden is next to ours. I can climb up the wall like anything; trust me to get to the top, and the first Scamp child I see I'll call out to him. Then, of course, they'll invite us all over the wall, and we'll have a glorious time.'

'But Peters!' said Babs, who was more cautious than her brother and sister. 'Suppose Peters gets well of her headache and comes out to look for us; and suppose she can't find us, and makes, oh! no end of a row, then what shall we do?'

'She won't,' said Jackdaw; 'she's awful bad; her face is quite green, and she has black marks under her eyes. Poor, dear old Peters! I am sorry, of course, but she'll have to sleep off that

headache. We all know when Peters has a headache that she's no good for at least a day. Oh, it *is* a chance! We'll have three long hours to ourselves. Come, Babs, at once!'

'I wish you two would go without me.'

'We *daren't!*' said Patch. 'We've courage for most things, but not for that. Dear old Baby, *you* must be in it, or none of us.'

Just at that moment the children heard the clear voice of a girl singing to herself a long way off.

'Georgie Porgie, pudding and pie,' she sang, 'kissed the girls and made them cry.'

'There!' said Patch in great excitement. 'Don't you hear her? That is Nora; I heard one of 'em called Roger shout out her name this morning. I was listening at the other side of the wall. Oh, do, *do* let's come!'

'Georgie Porgie,' began the clear, far-off voice again.

Babs felt excited, she did not know why. That sweet voice seemed to lure her to be naughty. All of a sudden she felt quite sure that she also wanted a desperate downright spree.

'I say,' she cried, rising to her feet, 'if we do this thing we'll do it fair. It would be horribly mean on the little mother to do wild, rebellious, naughty things when she is away—that is, without telling her. I don't mind doing it a bit if we may tell all about it afterwards.'

'Fess, you mean?' said Jackdaw, looking with considerable awe, and almost fear, at his sister.

'Well—yes,' said Baby. 'Confess; make a clean breast of it. Tell her out plain that we had to be naughty, and we were naughty, and that, of course, we'll take our punishment. I'll go on those terms; I won't go on any other.'

'Just like you, Babs,' said Patch.

'Yes, Babs, just like you,' remarked Jackdaw, 'but scrumptious, all the same. Jolly fine, I call it. We'll be naughty, and we'll 'fess afterwards and take our punishment.'

'Like true soldiers of the king,' said Baby, drawing herself up and pushing back her elf-locks.

'Well, let's come along at once; let's find 'em, and begin to enjoy ourselves,' cried Patch.

The home of these three children was in London. They were in the country now, enjoying a summer holiday. Their father and mother, Mr and Mrs Messager, had taken a large, rambling old place in Suffolk, and here the children could have a vast amount of liberty and fun. There were big gardens on the estate, and a wide lawn sloping away from the house, and a lake beyond the lawn, where two pretty boats, painted blue, were kept.

The children had almost perfect liberty, but there were certain rules they must obey. They must not go out in the boats without Thomas, the gardener's boy, accompanying them; and they must,

of course, not walk on the roads except with Miss Peters, who was their dear friend and holiday governess. But no one had ever said they were not to visit the Scamp Family, simply because no one had thought for a moment that they would attempt to do so.

There was a wicket gate leading into the large fruit-garden. This garden was surrounded by a brick wall over eight feet in height, and just at the other side of the wall was another fruit-garden, where children played and shouted and made all sorts of queer noises. In that garden children might be seen climbing to the tops of the tallest trees, and sitting on boughs that looked much too frail to hold them; and there was not the least doubt that on the other lake which was in their grounds the children went out in boats without any tiresome Thomas to keep them company. Even at night these children seemed to be mysteriously abroad; and neighbours, when speaking of them, said that the young Darrells were the most mischievous, wild, and difficult children to manage in the whole country-side.

They were known by the name of the Scamp Family, and the young Messagers were greedy to hear all about them from the first moment of their arrival. The Scamp Family! Oh dear! Mother might look shocked when she spoke about them; father might say, 'Thank goodness we have nothing to do with those desperate little rogues!' and Miss

Peters might hold them up as a warning, morning, noon, and night, to the little Messagers. But Babs, Patch, and Jackdaw—otherwise Muriel, Alice, and Dick—adored them. They dreamed of them. They hardly ever spoke of anything else—that is, when they were *quite* alone. Whenever Jackdaw had a few minutes all to himself he would rush into the fruit-garden and stand close to the brick wall which divided him from those audacious and terrible children, and if he heard their voices he would come back, trembling with delight, to tell Babs and Patch what he had overheard.

Until the afternoon when this story opens it had, however, never entered into the children's minds to get over the wall and claim the acquaintance of those rogues who played in the other garden, terrifying their neighbours, and doing all sorts of naughty things.

'Quick march!' said Baby now; and, followed by the others, she passed through the shrubbery and opened the wicket gate, and went down the long, straight walk in the centre of the garden. There were hedges of Scotch roses on either side of this walk—white roses to the left, pink roses to the right; and as these were all in full blossom the air was full of sweetness.

At another time Baby might have stopped to notice this and to sniff a little, but she was too anxious to indulge in her fit of desperate naughtiness to pause now to do anything of the sort.

'I say, stop that!' cried Baby.

By-and-by they reached the wall, and there, as though it were a great good fortune, they perceived that Thomas had left a ladder.

'I knew it,' said Jackdaw. 'It was because of the ladder I whispered to Patch, and Patch and I talked to you. We can get over, oh, so quickly! Who 'll go first? Will you, Babs?'

'Is Thomas anywhere about?' asked Babs.

'No; he and Simpkins are both at dinner.'

'Well, then, up I go,' said Babs.

She climbed the ladder, reached the top, and sat comfortably down on the wall, her feet and legs dangling over at the side which faced the Scamps's garden. Trembling with rapture, Jackdaw followed her example, and Patch came last. All three were soon seated on the wall. The legs of all three hung over towards the Scamps, and the faces of all three were flushed with excitement.

'Isn't it jolly?' whispered Jackdaw. 'I feel as though I must shout.'

'No, no! quiet, can't you?' said Patch. 'They 've none of 'em come along yet. I wonder when we 'll see 'em.'

'The girl who sang has gone away,' said Jackdaw, 'but oh! oh, they 're coming!'

They were. There was a shout, a sudden crash, and a boy fell flat on his face and hands, while another boy pursued him and began to beat him hard with a long stick.

'I say, stop that!' cried Baby. Her voice was

very authoritative, and the boy who was beating the other looked up in amazement.

'Goody Two Shoes! Who are you?' he cried.

'Muriel Messager,' came the calm response. 'I don't like your way of going on.'

'Nor do I,' said Jackdaw.

'Nor I,' said Patch.

'Get back this minute to your side of the wall, or I'll hurl a brick at you,' said the boy.

'No, you won't,' said Babs; 'you wouldn't dare.'

Her voice had an arresting note in it, and the boy, who was standing gazing at her in astonishment, and who had raised his arm as though in defiance, suddenly let it drop to his side. Meanwhile, the boy who had tripped on the grass got up. His face was disfigured by a great scratch, which was bleeding, but his bold black eyes, in utter astonishment, were fixed on the three children who sat on the wall.

'Goody Two Shoes!' he also exclaimed.

'Let's call Honora,' cried the eldest boy; 'she'll say whether I shall hurl a brick at these intruders or not. Go and fetch Honora, and don't be long, Dandy.'

The small boy flew as though on the wings of the wind, and presently a girl appeared in view. Babs made up her mind on the spot that she must be the girl who had sat in the tree and sung 'Georgie Porgie.' This girl was tall, taller even than tall Babs. She had a very erect figure, a

quantity of light, fluffy, pale golden hair, a little face, transparent in complexion, and wonderfully pretty and clear dark-blue eyes.

'I say, Nora, here's a go!' exclaimed the eldest boy.

CHAPTER II.

SNOWBALL.

'WHATEVER are you three doing here?' asked Nora Darrell.

'Curiosity brought us,' said Babs.

'You can go back again,' replied Nora; 'we don't want you.'

'We are the Messagers; we're your next-door neighbours, and you ought not to be rude,' said Babs.

'Let's fling something at 'em,' said the boy who had beaten his brother with a stick.—'You'd best go back, you three,' he added, raising his voice to a shrill scream, 'or you'll get what you don't want. Trespassers are warned off these grounds. —Dandy, fetch me some of that earth.—I'll mark your faces for you,' he continued.

'I'm surprised that you're not more hospitable,' said Babs.

'What do you mean by that?'

'We came,' said Babs, 'to see you—to pay you a visit. We're just as full of fun as you are; you ought not to turn us away. We're going to be punished afterwards for coming to see you, but we thought we'd bear even that for the sake of making friends with you. How nicely you sing,

Honora. You're the girl, are you not, who sang "Georgie Porgie"?'

'Yes,' said Nora. 'I don't want to be inhospitable,' she continued, turning and looking at her brother. 'We don't mind doing most things—do we, Roger?—but we draw the line at being inhospitable; that sort of thing is mean.'

'I think so too,' called out Patch.

The three children in the Scamp garden looked up at the three children on the wall.

'Let's consult Snowball,' suddenly remarked Nora. 'We'll let you know in a minute whether we pelt you back with sticks and mud, or whether we allow you to join us,' continued the young lady, speaking in a majestic voice.—'Dandy, get Snowball.'

The three on the wall waited with what patience they could for the arrival of the fourth member of the Scamp Family. They wondered what she could be like. Snowball—Snowball; but surely no one living could be fairer in appearance than the girl who called herself Nora.

Dandy darted out of view. Presently shrieks were heard, which changed almost into yells, and the next minute he appeared in view, leading by the hair a black-eyed, black-haired, roly-poly sort of girl of about eight years of age.

'This is Snowball,' said Roger, giving Dandy a cuff to make him let go the victim's hair, and pulling the round, very fat, very stout, dark girl

into view. 'We call her Snowball for fun; she's an imp of wickedness. If she takes to you, you're all right; if she don't, well, you'd best scoot, you know.'

'Won't take to no one,' sobbed Snowball.

'Yes, you will, Ball, you will,' said Nora, dropping on her knees and wiping the tears of rage from Snowball's round black eyes. 'Dandy had no right to pull you by the hair.'

'Want to kill him! want to kill him!' wailed Snowball.

'Never mind about that now. You see those three on the wall?'

'Nasty, nasty things,' said Snowball.

'They are our guests—at least, that's how they put it. They're the children from next door. Shall we have them over? It would be fun to teach them some of our ways.'

Snowball raised her injured countenance and looked at the three.

'It was you what got my hair pulled,' she said. 'It was you. I was sitting eating gooseberries all by my lonesome, and Dandy came and pulled me 'way. I don't want any of you, unless that boy will cuff Dandy.—Boy, will you cuff Dandy? If so, you may come 'long down.'

Jackdaw uttered an excited 'Hurrah! I'll cuff him fast enough, Snowball.'

'Then come 'long,' said Snowball.

'But he can't go without me,' said Babs.

'Nor without me,' said Patch. 'You must have us all if you have one.'

'You may all come,' said Snowball. 'You can stand round and see Dandy cuffed. Now then!'

'We can't get down without a ladder,' exclaimed Babs.

'Oh yes, you can; we'll hold out our hands, and you can jump,' remarked Nora, who had now changed her tone to one of absolute friendliness.

She stood under the wall. Babs stretched out her long legs to their fullest, caught the extended hand, and sprang. A minute later the little ones followed her example.

'You'll have tea with us?' said Nora, who became instantly very polite.

'With pleasure, if you will be so kind as to give us some,' said Babs.

'But, first of all, Dandy's to be cuffed!' cried Snowball.

'Yes, you'd best set to work,' said Nora; 'there'll be no peace till Snowball is pleased.'

'Come along, just here,' said Snowball, taking Jackdaw by the hand. 'Now then—here he is—cuff away!'

Jackdaw squared himself and doubled his fists. He wished he had boxing-gloves. Dandy came on like a young fury. The fight was just beginning. Dandy's face wore a particularly ugly expression, when Snowball rushed between them like a small tornado.

'Can't help it,' she said. 'This boy's pretty, and you're not to hurt him, Dandy. He's no coward; that's all I wanted to know. Let's come along and feed.'

The seven children walked across the enchanted ground of the Scamp garden. It was delicious to be in forbidden territory. So thought the naughty Messagers. Baby found herself walking with Nora.

'How pretty you are,' she said, 'and how queer!'

'Thanks; how am I queer?'

'Why do you let that small, round child rule you?'

'Snowball?' said Nora in a careless voice. 'We do it for our own peace and comfort. If she don't have her way she makes it unpleasant for the rest. You'll understand when you know her better. I say, how often are you coming over?'

'Over?'

'Yes, over the wall?'

'I don't know,' said Babs, colouring. 'P'r'aps you won't want us again.'

'Once our guests, you are our guests for ever,' said Nora. 'We'll watch you a bit to-day, and if we like you we'll let you into our secrets to-morrow.'

'Your secrets? O—h!'

'We have dozens—they're all exciting—we're a very rebellious lot, though we don't want to be.

Have you a horrid, sneaking, miserly old great-uncle to look after you?'

'No; we have a dear father and mother. Haven't you a father and mother?'

'Dead long ago,' said Nora; 'know nothing about 'em. It's Great-uncle Michael looks after us; and there's an odious governess called Spicer. Yah! don't I hate her? And there's a tutor for Roger and Dandy; his name is Lawson; he's a weak sort, but better than Spicer. Spicer's a sneak; she tells tales of us to Uncle Mike. Oh goody, what a life we have! We're called the Scamp Family—you'd better know; you dreadful proper-looking creatures won't want to have anything to do with us after that.'

'Oh yes, we will,' said Babs; 'it's your name that has made us just long to be with you.'

Nora's blue eyes sparkled.

'How queer you should say that! Well, here's tea; we have it in the old summer-house. Uncle'd be mad if he knew. We've got his Crown Derby set out to-day; we always feed off the very best china, and we use the old silver; we sneak the things out without any one knowing. Goody! Uncle would have a fit if he saw. I heard him say once to a visitor that the Crown Derby was worth more than a cool thou'. Don't know what he meant; but, anyhow, we're going to drink out of it.'

'It must be *very* valuable,' said Baby in a hushed voice; 'aren't you afraid?'

'Afraid! You don't know us. If we break it he'll not know. Sometimes we have a little row over our meals, and want to fling cups and saucers about; but I generally have some common ones in a basket handy for the purpose.'

They entered the summer-house. Nora took the head of the table. Roger began to cut the bread, and immediately also cut his finger badly. Snowball shrieked at the sight of blood, and but for Babs there might have been ugly consequences. But when she tore her own handkerchief in two, and bound up the hero's wound, he gave her quite a grateful smile, and she found out for the first time that he was really a handsome boy. A queer thought came into her head. Suppose it was to be the Messagers' mission really to help the Scamp Family! The children were not nearly as lucky as she and Patch and Jackdaw were.

'I'll cut the bread, if I may; may I, Roger?' she said in a gentle tone.

'Don't care,' said Roger. 'But you'll have to please Snowball; she's awful particular.—Oh Snowball! *must* you sit in the centre of the table?'

'I be,' said Snowball calmly.

She climbed on to the cloth and established herself in the middle, 'just as though she were a centre-piece,' as Jackdaw explained afterwards.

Her legs were tucked tightly under her, and her appearance in this position was too funny for words. Baby gave her a piece of bread.

'Butter it and jam it, goose,' said Snowball.

'You must put lots of butter,' said Dandy, 'and spread the jam very thick, or she 'll fling it at you. It 's her temper; she can't help it, poor thing! She 's took after her Great-uncle Michael.—Haven't you, Snowball?'

'Yes,' said Snowball, looking profoundly impressed and pleased with herself. 'But I'm *worser* nor he. I can scream for an hour on the top of my voice. Can any of *you* scream for an hour on the top of your voices?'

'None of us wish to,' said Babs.

'That 's 'cos you can't do it,' remarked Snowball, casting a withering glance at the speaker, and then beginning to demolish her bread, butter, and jam.

As soon as this young fury began to eat, the rest of the Scamp Family eagerly followed her example.

'Thirsty!' she said, turning her rolling black eyes in the direction of her sister.

'How do you feel with regard to the cup, Snowball? Shall it be Delft or Crown Derby?'

'Delft 's best,' replied the young lady.

Her eyes were fixed on Patch, and poor Patch was earnestly wishing herself at the other side of the wall.

'Would you like a bath?' asked Snowball in an innocent voice.

'No, thank you,' said Patch.

'You 'll have it all the same.'

A grim smile passed over Nora's face. She poured a great deal of milk into Snowball's cup of tea.

'It won't hurt her now if she ducks her head,' she remarked, looking at Baby.

'Oh, what?' cried Patch, preparing to hide under the table.

But she was too late. The next moment the contents of the cup had drenched her face and head. The Scamp Family laughed uproariously.

Patch made a valiant effort, and did not cry.

'Let me get to her,' said Snowball, instantly scrambling off the table.—'Why, Patch, you're just as good as Jackdaw. I like you. I'll dry your hair, and show you my nest just under the best gooseberry-tree. Let's go away by ourselves. Let's be lonesome for a bit, and eat gooseberries.'

'You're all right; go with her,' said Nora.

The two little girls left the summer-house hand-in-hand.

'What do you call your sister?' asked Nora of Babs.

'Her name is Alice, but we call her Patch.'

'Snowball's name is Victoria. We always call her Snowball,' said Roger.

'Patch will be all right with Snowball now,'

remarked Nora. 'And, thank goodness! we'll be able to have a proper meal; we never can when the young fury is abroad.'

'But why don't you train her?' asked Babs.

'Oh! ask somebody else that question,' was Nora's reply. 'She can't help herself; she's got Uncle Mike's temper, only ten times as bad.'

CHAPTER III.

'THREE BLIND MICE.'

WHEN Babs, Patch, and Jackdaw returned home after that marvellous and delicious afternoon with the Scamp Family—when they had returned by the way they had come—namely, over the garden wall—they walked very slowly back to the house.

Mother must have come back by now, and mother would have to be told.

'I will do it,' said Baby, 'the very first thing, the moment I see her. I sha'n't lose a second.'

'You are awfully brave,' said Patch; 'I shouldn't have the courage. I wonder if she'll be angry.'

'Angry?' said Baby. 'Of course she will. We expected that, didn't we? When we went we knew that mother would be very angry indeed. We must bear our punishment with great patience.'

Jackdaw gave a troubled sigh. Patch lingered behind Baby as they approached the house; but the very first news which reached them as they went indoors were eager words falling from the lips of Miss Peters.

Miss Peters was in the hall. She had quite got over her headache. It is true she looked a little

pale, and there were very dark shadows under her eyes; but she had recovered.

'How late you are, children!' she said. 'I was beginning to be anxious about you.'

'It's only half-past eight! Where's mother, Peters darling? Is she in her own room?'

'No; I was just going to tell you. A telegram arrived an hour ago to say that your father and mother cannot return until Saturday. This is only Tuesday. I am afraid you are disappointed, my children; I know how you will miss your beloved parents.'

'Indeed we shall,' answered Babs.

But Patch and Jackdaw were silent. If Miss Peters had not been the most unsuspicious person on earth she would have noticed that they cast bright, inquiring, and very relieved glances at their elder sister.

'Is anything wrong with father and mother?' was Baby's next remark.

'Oh no, dear; your mother wired, "Prevented returning until Saturday. Writing. Love to children."'

'Well, I suppose, it can't be helped,' said Babs. 'We'll just run upstairs and get tidy for supper, Miss Peters.'

The children went to their rooms. They met presently on the landing.

'I say, Babs!' cried Jackdaw, 'this is scrumptious—isn't it?'

'You mean,' answered Babs, 'that we won't be able to tell mother to-night. Well, I don't think it's scrumptious at all. I don't want to have a confession hanging over our heads until Saturday; I'd rather tell right away.'

'But you can't, you know,' said Jackdaw. 'You can't talk to the little mother when she's not at home.'

'I could write to her,' said Babs.

'Oh, but that would be too dreadful,' said Patch. 'You couldn't explain at all properly in a letter; you know that.'

'It would certainly be very difficult,' said Babs. She stood and thought for a minute, then continued, 'Yes; we shall have to put it off until Saturday. Now, let's come to supper. Notwithstanding our tea in the Scamp garden, I am starving.'

The children entered the dining-room. Miss Peters was waiting for them. She was very gentle and very kind, and they all loved her. She had been their nursery governess long ago, and had been their holiday governess ever since they could remember. Not for the world would they hurt her; but she had no great influence over them. It did not occur once to one of them to tell her about that wild expedition over the garden wall.

After supper they all went to bed, and so the first night which followed their acquaintanceship

with the Scamp Family passed peacefully away. In the morning the little Messagers awoke with heads and hearts full of one idea. They did not speak of it—at least, not at first; but it was there, shining out of their eyes and filling their minds. How could they meet those four fascinating, terribly naughty children again? They ought not, of course, to see any more of them. They had seen them once, and had done wrong to make their acquaintance. To have anything further to say to Nora and Roger and Dandy and Snowball would be terribly wicked. Nevertheless, they could not help thinking about it.

After breakfast Baby said, 'We must play to-day at the farther end of the garden. Miss Peters says that Thomas can take us on the lake. Suppose we land on the island and have a jolly picnic tea.'

She tried to speak with great emphasis, but her words fell flat. Her proposal was received by the two younger children in gloomy silence.

'I *hate* that island,' said Patch.

'And it's so dull having picnics alone,' was Jackdaw's remark.

In her heart Babs of course echoed these sentiments. At this moment her eyes met those of Patch. Patch grew crimson. Then Babs looked at Jackdaw, and that naughty little boy winked.

'Can't we see some more of the Scamp Family?' he asked. 'They are expecting us; Roger said so.'

'Roger?' cried Baby. 'What do you mean, Jackdaw? I told Nora last night quite distinctly that we had come over the wall once, but most probably would never do so again. I was very plain about it—very plain. She seemed a little hurt, but I think she understood.'

'She didn't,' said Jackdaw. 'She didn't believe you for a single moment. I saw Roger this morning.'

'When? Where?' asked the other two.

'Over the wall. He popped his head over like a rocket, and just said this: "We'll have a ladder waiting at our side of the wall at three o'clock sharp. All three of you come. Grand fun—Snowball—picnic—best china—Great-uncle Michael away—don't be late!" Before I had time to say either "Yes" or "No" he was gone. But I heard him laughing as he ran down his ladder.'

'A picnic with the Scamps!' said Patch. 'It is awfully fascinating! Isn't it, Babs?'

'Yes; but wicked,' said Babs with decision.

'Surely not more wicked than yesterday, Baby!'

'Yes,' said Baby; 'it is more wicked. We meant to go just once, and then to confess.'

'Oh,' said Jackdaw, ''course we'd 'fess.'

'But we didn't,' said Babs. 'Mother was away, and we couldn't. To go to-day would be just awful.'

'We'd only have a bigger 'fession to make,' said Jackdaw.

'Oh dear!' said Baby. 'I wish I knew! I wish—I *wish* I knew!'

'Listen!' said Patch. 'Listen!'

At the other side of the wall a gay, seductive, siren-like voice was singing 'Three Blind Mice.' It sang:

'Three blind mice;
See how they run!
They all ran after the farmer's wife,
Who cut off their tails with the carving-knife;
Did you ever see such a thing in your life—
As three blind mice?'

'Perhaps she's thinking about us,' said Babs with great solemnity; 'perhaps we're the blind mice.'

'Nonsense!' cried the others.

'Children,' said Miss Peters, 'why don't you come to lessons?'

The children entered the house. They were inattentive over their lessons that morning. Patch could not do her sums right. Jackdaw smudged his copy-book. Babs wrote her English history essay with many inaccuracies.

At eleven o'clock the children always had a brief recess. As a rule they ran wildly about the garden. But on this special day they went out, it is true, but they made no noise. They stood under a tree discussing that question of all questions.

'I'm going!' said Jackdaw.

'Oh Jackdaw!' Babs looked at him sorrowfully out of her big gray eyes.

'And I!' said Patch. Her face grew crimson. She clutched her brother's arm to support herself.

'We're both going!' said Jackdaw. 'You may as well come too, Babs. Patch and I have made up our minds to be wicked. It'll be as easy to 'fess about two wickednesses as about one. You *must* come with us. You must, Babs; you must!'

'Three blind mice,' sang the clear voice in the distant garden.

It was to that seductive sound that Baby finally yielded.

'It is wicked,' she said. 'It is desperately mean; but I'll do it this once—*only* this once, remember. Ah! there's the bell. We'll have to return to horrid lessons. What *are* we to do about dear old Peters?'

'She mustn't know,' said the other two children.

'We'll think of something,' said Babs.

They all re-entered the house.

CHAPTER IV.

PICNIC TEA.

THE ways of these naughty children were made surprisingly easy for them, for during the early dinner Miss Peters said, 'You can have Thomas if you like this afternoon, and may go on the lake. I trust you, of course, not to move about too much in the boat. You can have a picnic on the island, too, if you wish it.'

Miss Peters paused after making the last suggestion, as though she expected shouts of delight. But Babs replied in a gentle tone, 'Thank you, Peters darling; but it's very hot to-day, and I think we would rather not have a picnic on the island.'

'Just as you wish, dear,' said Peters; 'but I regret to say that I shall not be with you. I've received a long letter from your mother by the second post, and she wants me to go into Harlington to buy a lot of things for the house.'

Harlington was the nearest big town, seven miles away.

'I have ordered the trap,' continued Miss Peters, 'and shall start soon after two. I am sorry to leave you all, but you'll find plenty to amuse yourselves with.'

'Oh yes, plenty,' said Babs.

Jackdaw suddenly darted under the table and gave way to an irrepressible chuckle. Patch grew crimson and bit her lips. Miss Peters asked in a vague sort of voice in which she often spoke, 'Is anything the matter?'

But being very intent on the business she had to execute for Mrs Messager, she scarcely waited for a reply.

The meal came to an end. The holiday governess went off to prepare for her drive to Harlington, and the children looked at each other.

'What a time we'll have!' said Patch. 'Let's come out at once into the sunshine—let's sing—let's jump about—let's get off some of the steam.'

Certainly Patch and Jackdaw were delighted. They had not a scrap of remorse about them; but Baby, although she was quite determined to have one more day of pleasure, was a little uneasy. She hoped that things would be so very exciting in the Scamp garden that she would forget her uneasiness.

After Peters had gone and the last sound of the departing wheels had died away on the summer air, Thomas came up to the children.

'Shall I get the boat ready?' he asked.

'No, Thomas; we sha'n't want the boat to-day,' said Baby.

Thomas touched his cap and went away, looking relieved. He did not go back into the garden, for

which fact the three children fervently blessed him.

At last the hour, the delightful hour named by Roger, approached. There was no ladder on this occasion by the great peach-tree, so the children could not climb to the top of the wall as comfortably as they had done yesterday; but by clinging on to the gnarled boughs of an old pear-tree they did contrive to reach it; Babs with a torn frock, Patch with a great scratch across her cheek, and Jackdaw with one of his ankles slightly hurt.

When they got to the top of the wall they all three sat down and prepared to rest. They felt hot, flushed, excited. Where were the Scamps? The garden seemed perfectly still. Sunlight lay all over it, but not a living creature could they see. At last they heard a smothered laugh. Then four voices began to sing:

'Three blind mice;
See how they run!'

And from under the shadow of a great oak-tree, Roger, Nora, Dandy, and Snowball marched.

'Welcome!' they said. 'Here's a ladder.'

They pulled the ladder along and put it up against the wall, and the three Messagers descended. The moment they reached the ground Snowball linked her hand inside Patch's arm, Nora took possession of Baby, and Jackdaw found himself

left to the tender mercies of Roger and Dandy, who walked one at each side of him.

'Great-uncle Michael 's gone! Hurrah! hurrah!' called Snowball, pinching Patch on the arm as she spoke.

'Don't pinch—you hurt!' said Patch.

'I 'll pinch if I like!' said Snowball, and she did so again with vigour.

Patch wrenched herself away and looked at her.

'I want to say something,' was Patch's first remark.

'Well, firebrand, speak!' said Snowball.

'You 're not to call me that,' said Patch. 'I am older than you. I like you very much, but I 'm not going to be afraid of you. If we 're to be friends we 'll play fair.'

'When did you think of that?' said Snowball.

'Last night, in bed, I made up my mind'——

'Go on,' said Snowball. 'I don't mind; say what you want.'

'We 'll play fair, you and I, if we 're to be friends,' said Patch again.

'What is playing fair?'

'Not pinching and not flinging mugs of tea at one, and not forcing one to eat more gooseberries than one wants to. That 's playing fair, and that 's the only way I play with you. Now, you understand.'

'Aren't you frightened of me—even one bit?' said Snowball.

'Frightened? Not a scrap.'

'But this is *our* garden.'

'I know,' said Patch; 'that's the reason why you must play extra fair. You all invited us over; you've to treat us well now.'

Snowball looked almost uncomfortable.

'Everybody in the world is afraid of me,' she said. 'I frighten all the servants, and even Great-uncle Michael will give me things when I hide in the study and pinch his legs. I get under his table and pinch and pinch, and when he chases me I run and run. He's rather lame, and he can't run fast, and I *do* have fun! When he's dead tired, I say I'll go when I can get—— And then he gives me whatever I want. That's how I manage. The others are afraid of me too; everybody is. You are—you know you are!'

'I'm not one scrap,' said Patch. 'I'll leave you now—I'll go to the others.'

She began to march down the garden. There was no one in sight. She had spoken very bravely, as she meant to speak; but just at this instant she wanted to be at the other side of the wall.

'Come back! Stop, this minute!' said Snowball.

Patch did not turn. 'Whatever happens, she mustn't see that I am funky,' thought the little girl to herself.

The next minute there was a scamper and a rush, and Snowball planted herself in front of her.

'Knock me down!' she said.

'What *do* you mean?' said Patch.

'Knock me down, this instant! I'm like a nine-pin; you can soon bowl me over. If you're not desperate afraid, knock me down and prove it!'

Then Patch went for her. In an instant Snowball was sprawling on the ground. She sprang to her feet with a gay laugh.

'Hurrah!' she said. 'You stand there; it's my turn now!'

'No,' said Patch; 'you're not to knock me down.'

'I'm *not* to! Whatever do you mean?'

'What I say. I won't have it. This is your garden, and you've all asked us over as visitors, and if you're rude to us I'll run up that ladder and get over the wall, and never, never come back to you again.'

Snowball stared very hard at Patch, and Patch looked back at her. How brave Patch felt! What a heroine she was in her own eyes! As to Snowball, her little dark face grew crimson. She clenched her hands, and, slowly turning her roly-poly body round, stood with her fat, broad back to Patch.

'I can't bear it,' she said, under her breath; 'seems as if I was sort of being conquered.'

Patch longed to fly to her, to comfort and hug her. There was something infinitely pathetic and infinitely funny in Snowball's broad back. Patch, however, felt that the moment of absolute victory was scarcely yet assured.

'I can't! I won't!' gasped Snowball. Then all of a sudden she turned round. She held out her hand.

'*Pax!* You queer, strange, brave thing,' she said, 'let's kiss and be proper friends.'

Round Patch's neck Snowball flung her arms as though she were a little windmill suddenly let loose. She curled her legs round Patch's slim body, and kissed and kissed, and hugged and hugged.

Some one heard her. There came a mocking laugh. In a moment Snowball was free. In another instant she had caught Dandy by the hair. With furious blows she cuffed Dandy until he cried for mercy. Then she flung him from her and returned to Patch.

'Now I'm better,' she said. 'Now let's have fun. Going to have a picnic.'

'I know,' said Patch. 'I am just longing for it.'

'Going to have a real, real glorious time!' said Snowball. 'Come along into the house this instant. You've not been in the house yet. Great-uncle Michael's away. When the cat's away the mice will play. Oh, *won't* we play just to-day—won't we just!'

They entered the house. It was cool, for the old house had big rooms and long and lofty passages. It was, in short, a very ramshackle, badly kept old place, with not half enough servants, and no one to keep the Scamp family in any kind of order.

The house felt very still. Patch was impressed; even Snowball began to walk softly.

'What's the matter?' she asked suddenly of her little companion.

'Don't know,' said Patch; 'feel as though I couldn't, somehow, talk loud.'

'That's like me,' echoed Snowball. 'I'm like that in every room in the house 'cept Great-uncle Michael's study. There I'm a demon. Don't you love being a demon, Patch?'

'No,' said Patch; 'I never was one yet,' she continued, and she brought out the last words with a half-sigh, half-laugh.

Snowball looked at her.

'Great friends, isn't we?' she said, squeezing up to her side.

'Oh, certainly!' said Patch.

'Going to be greater, isn't we?'

'Yes,' said Patch.

'And naughty,' said Snowball; 'both of us together, planning monstrous big naughtinesses. Others 'fraid of us, we two 'fraid of nobody.'

'Look here, Snowball,' said Patch, 'I'm not at all sure 'bout that.'

Snowball's black eyes began to roll in that fearful way she had when she was up to mischief.

'Nice girl,' she said, squeezing Patch's hand. 'We begin our larks this instant minute; only larks, you know — monstrous fun, you know. Come 'long to pantry; we must get tea. I always

choose tea and food for picnics. I know more about eating than any other thing in the world. That's why I'm so fat, 'cause I stodge, and stodge, and stodge. You're shocking thin, Patch; you'll have to stodge too. Look at me; isn't my back just beautiful?'

'It's much too broad,' said Patch.

Snowball rolled her wicked eyes again.

'I wouldn't have your back for all the wide world,' she said. 'Now, come 'long to pantry.'

The butler's pantry was very large, larger than many an ordinary room. It had deep cupboards lining the walls. Snowball proceeded, by the help of a step-ladder, to ransack the contents of the cupboards. They were certainly full of delicious and appetising things. Snowball made a selection. Two plum-cakes were handed to Patch to put upon the centre table.

'Rich, dark, spicy — smelly with richness!' exclaimed Snowball.

The cakes were followed by different pots of jam, Snowball smacking her lips as she handed them, one after another, to Patch.

'Blackberries,' she said, 'good; apricots, better; strawberries, best! Blackberries, apricots, strawberries! Good, better, best!' said Snowball. 'Now then—bread, two loaves. I'm hungry. Butter—this big pat; cream—ha! ha! Great-uncle Michael, there'll be no cream for your tea to-night!'

In addition to all things necessary for a great

and lordly picnic, Snowball produced little delicacies in the shape of tins of sardines and little jars of potted meats. She then discovered a caddy full of tea and another with sugar.

'Now then,' she said, 'begin to load up. There 's two baskets handy under that table; we 'll pop the things in, then I 'll load myself with one basket and you 'll load yourself with the other. We 'll come back afterwards for the cups and saucers. It 's old Wedgwood to-day; we had Crown Derby last time. We 'll get the china out of Great-uncle Michael's own special private study. I stole the key from him. I wear it on a string round my neck; told Dandy and Roger it was my wedding-ring. I mean to marry early. I always say so to the boys. Do you mean to marry early, Patch?'

'Don't mean to marry ever,' said Patch.

Snowball began to roll her eyes again. Then she burst into screams of laughter.

'Why, you 'll be an old maid!' she said.

'I like old maids,' said Patch. 'I 'll never marry.'

'But I want a husband,' said Snowball, 'just to keep him in order, for no other sort of thing. He *will* have a time with me, won't he just?'

She grinned and showed her pretty little teeth and rolled her black eyes again, and then proceeded to pack the baskets. When packed, they were slung by means of straps round each little girl's neck, and in this fashion they wandered down through the grounds. A cross-

looking old housekeeper saw them as they went, shook her fist at them, but made no attempt to remonstrate.

'That 's Lucky Jones,' said Snowball. 'I always call her Lucky Jones 'cause it frets her. She 's monstrous frightened of me, and I want her to be frightened of you too, Patch. Then she 'll give me more good things. Now then, let 's hurry; the others are calling. You and me can't be parted a minute now, can we, Patch?'

Patch made no reply. The basket was very heavy and the leather strap hurt her neck. Snowball marched on very quickly, stamping her feet as she walked. Patch lingered behind.

'Why don't you hurry? You *are* a duffer!' called the young lady.

'Can't; your basket 's too heavy,' said Patch.

But at last they reached their destination. Nora came up quite gravely and removed the straps from the children's necks, placed the baskets tenderly on the ground, and looked at Snowball.

'Splendiferous!' said Snowball. 'Lucky Jones had just filled all the cupboards; the plum-cakes are hot.'

'Oh,' cried Roger, 'scrumptious! I say, Snowball, you *are* a witch!'

'You hear, Patch?' exclaimed Snowball. 'I 'm a witch! Aren't you frightened of me?'

'Not a bit,' said Patch.

'We 's friends, we are,' said Snowball, looking

at the others. 'We's friends for ever and ever. She knocked me down—*me!* What do you think of that?—Come 'long, Patch, we must fetch china now.'

Patch was about to refuse, but she saw the eyes of the others fixed upon her, as though they did not believe for a single moment that she could have conquered so great and dreadful a person as Snowball. Her face grew crimson. She felt a little tired. She was not enjoying herself as much as she expected. She turned at once and followed Snowball, who, with bold dexterity, secured the old Wedgwood from its place in Great-uncle Michael's china cabinet. She was very deft in her movements, and brought out little cups and saucers which had not been used for over a century. These precious cups, which could never now be reproduced, for Wedgwood's secret died with him, were packed recklessly into a basket. Sugar-bowl and slop-basin followed suit; the milk-jug was put in last. Then the children returned once more to that broad, delightful piece of ground where the picnic was to be held. Trees shaded it, and in the centre was a patch of grass, smooth as velvet and green as emerald.

Here Nora and Baby had already laid a broad white cloth. Meanwhile the boys were busy boiling the kettle in gipsy fashion over a fire made of sticks. When Snowball arrived with the precious cups and saucers she began to dance a wild jig round the flames.

'Isn't it scrumptious? And isn't I just mad hungry for the plum-cake?' she remarked.

Tea was made all in good time, and the children sat down to enjoy it. They were just in the middle of it — Snowball had her teeth inserted into a specially rich piece of cake — when the sound of an approaching crutch was distinctly audible, as it tapped the ground, and Great-uncle Michael—a very tall, dark, ferocious-looking man—looked down at the group.

The effect of his sudden presence on the scene caused the four members of the Scamp Family to make themselves scarce on the spot. How they vanished nobody knew, but vanish they did, so that not a sign of any one of them was visible. Only, Snowball in her flight had dashed down one of the precious Wedgwood cups and broken it to shivers. Great-uncle Michael found that he had no one to speak to but Baby, Patch, and Jackdaw.

'Who *are* you?' he said, in a deep and really awful voice. 'And what, in the name of all that is impudent, has brought you here?'

CHAPTER V.

UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

'GET up!' said Great-uncle Michael.

The three children scrambled at once to their feet.

'Who are you?' he said, addressing Baby.

'My name,' she answered, 'is Muriel Messager.'

'Ha!—And your name, miss?' he continued, addressing Patch.

'Alice Messager,' she responded.

'And yours, young sir?'

'Dick Messager.'

'How is it that you three, perfect strangers, find yourselves on my property?'

Baby felt a great catch in her breath; there also came a huge lump in her throat. She felt it quite impossible to speak. All of a sudden she was sure that she and her brother and sister were desperately naughty. They had come to see the Scamp Family without leave. Great-uncle Michael was the right person to invite them, and Great-uncle Michael did not up to the present moment even know of their existence. They had come, knowing that their own parents would not wish them to come. Oh, it was awful! They were wicked!

'Why don't you speak?' said Great-uncle

Michael; and he pointed his gold-headed stick, which he held in his right hand—while he leaned heavily on his crutch under his left arm—fiercely at the children. 'What are you doing here? I know no Messagers. I don't wish people to come uninvited to my grounds. Speak! I shall deal with my own family after you have gone.'

'We came,' said Baby, suddenly recovering herself, 'first of all out of curiosity: we wanted to see the children. We live at the other side of the wall.'

'At the other side of what wall?' asked Great-uncle Michael.

'The garden wall, please, sir.'

His black eyes began to twinkle, but there was not a sign of relenting for all that on his fierce old face.

'You live at the other side of my garden wall?'

'Yes, sir, please,' said Baby. 'We are summer visitors.'

'Oh, you live at The Meadows, old Kemp's place?'

'Don't know, sir,' said Jackdaw suddenly. 'It's father and mother's place now.'

'Hold your tongue, impudence!' said the old gentleman. 'So you, who live in Kemp's place, *dared* to come and visit me?' he said, addressing Baby.

'Please, sir, it wasn't you—it was the children.'

'Kemp,' said the old gentleman—'Kemp, my greatest enemy! I had the garden wall built two

feet higher all on account of Kemp. How did you get over it?'

'Climbed, and with ladders,' said Patch, speaking for the first time.

'Ha, ha! Thieves, all of you!'

'We're not!' said Patch indignantly.

Her encounter with Snowball had made her feel even brave enough to fight Great-uncle Michael.

'I say you are. I won't be contradicted. Would you like to feel the force of this cane on your shoulders, little girl?'

'You wouldn't be so rude,' said Patch.

'Come! come! come! You belong to the rebel lot! I have four of them in my establishment. Now look here—there's to be no more of this. I have not the honour, Misses and Master Messager' —Great-uncle Michael's voice was intensely sarcastic—'I have not the honour of the acquaintance of your father and mother, and, to be frank with you, I don't wish to know the parents of such thievish children. Back you go now! No more of my food do you taste. Come, quick march! all three of you. Let me see you get back over the garden wall; that'll be a pleasant sight for me. I will deal with my own rascals when I am rid of you.'

The old gentleman looked very determined. The delicious tea was cooling in those cups of rarest Wedgwood; the delicious plum-cake, with its spicy

odour which quite seemed to fill the air, must be untasted. The jams, the bread and butter, the potted meats, must all be for the Messagers as if they did not exist. They had come over the garden wall practically uninvited, and back they were to go in disgrace.

'No lingering,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'On you go in front of me.'

They went in a group: Baby in the middle, Patch at one side, Jackdaw at the other. Great-uncle Michael was able to walk quickly notwithstanding his crutch, and the children knew that if they lingered that gold-headed cane might, and probably would, inflict a blow.

At last they reached the spot where they had got over; and just then they heard—far, far away in a distant part of the grounds—the well-known voice of Nora singing once again, evidently from the topmost shelter of a tree, the words 'Three blind mice.' Patch could have stamped her foot; she was shaking with rage. Baby was deeply humbled. Jackdaw was disgusted.

Just at that moment there was a little movement in a shrub near by, and Patch saw, staring out at her and winking, the bold, rolling black eyes of Snowball. Those eyes, on this occasion, gave her the strangest sense of comfort. Snowball sympathised with her. Snowball was at once afraid and ashamed. Come what would, Patch made up her mind that she must see Snowball again.

'Here's the garden wall,' said Baby; and she turned and faced the old gentleman.

'I see it,' he answered. 'Get over, please!'

'But we can't; there's no ladder.'

'How did you get down?'

'We had a ladder to come down.'

'Then you shall have a ladder to go up. I don't care a rap how you get down at the other side.'

The old gentleman uttered a shout, and a gardener, who was doing something not far away, appeared.

'Fetch the ladder!' said Grand-uncle Michael.

The ladder was quickly brought, the man standing back after he had placed it, and looking on them with a silly, frightened expression. He knew well, poor fellow! that the four dreadful Scamp children would have it out of him that evening.

Jackdaw was the first to ascend the ladder; Patch came next, Baby last. Before Baby went up she turned and spoke.

'I am sorry we did it,' she said. 'We Messagers are ladies and gentlemen, as a rule. I am sorry we forgot ourselves.'

'I don't care one single scrap whether you are sorry or not,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'Get out of my sight, and never come back—that's all I want to say to you.'

After this ungracious speech, Baby ascended the

ladder with what dignity she could. The three children all managed to get down at the other side. Then Baby walked quickly to where there were seats under a wide oak-tree, and, sinking down on the first she came to, burst into tears.

'Now I understand how desperately wicked we are,' she said.

'I don't see that we are so desperately naughty,' said Patch. She was determined to be defiant. 'That dreadful old man,' she continued, 'he is not the least like our father.'

'No,' said Baby, through her sobs; 'but the place is his, and the children belong to him, and we should not—oh! we should not—have got over the garden wall. What we have done is dreadful—dreadful!'

She continued to sob. Patch looked at Jackdaw. Patch felt a high colour on each of her cheeks, and she knew that her eyes were shining. Jackdaw looked a little defiant, with his head thrown back and his closely cropped and curly hair looking more curly than ever. He was the sort of boy who would not give in for the world. Nevertheless, Baby's tears were disconcerting. Baby *was* Baby, the eldest of them all. They gave her her ridiculous name just because she was so big, and because, in spite of themselves, the other two invariably followed her. And now she was in tears—she who never cried, who had mopped away their tears time and again, who had smiled herself

through the worst troubles which had come into her young life. No matter how much Alice and Dick had teased her, Muriel had never resented it; she had been, as they expressed it when they talked it over together, 'too big to notice that sort of thing.'

'She is like a great, beautiful collie,' Patch used to say.

'She is like a thoroughbred horse,' Jackdaw would remark. 'She does not notice small things; they are all only like gnats to her.'

Then there was something about Baby which made it rather nice to 'rag' her, as the other children expressed it; particularly when she did not mind being ragged. But now this great, strong, elder sister was crying. She said they were all naughty. Of course they were not; that was nonsense. They would explain to mother when she came on Saturday. Mother would put things right. She would go and see that dreadful old man, and perhaps the Scamp Family might come and play in their garden, and get over their wall, and enjoy themselves in their grounds. But their present business was to comfort Baby. So, after a minute's silent consultation, during which the eyes of Patch looked into the eyes of Jackdaw, the two children dropped on their knees, one on each side of their sister, and each tried to take her hand.

'Stop crying, Babs—do! We don't feel that we have done anything wrong; but if you think we

have I suppose you are right. Anyhow, there is no good crying; we have got to act.'

'Yes,' said Baby, suddenly drying away her tears fiercely; 'we have got to act. We had no right to get over the wall, and that old gentleman, whatever his true name is, acted as perhaps our father would have acted if we were strangers to him, and he had found us in his grounds. Those children are not nice or good, and I don't want to have anything more to do with them.'

'Three blind mice,' sang Nora, very faintly, from the other side of the wall.

'She has a pleasant voice,' said Patch; and, 'Oh! oh!' She turned quickly, and her face grew crimson, for, looking at her from over the wall was the little round face of Snowball.

That face, almost as round as face could be, with its black, black eyes, flashed at her for a second, and then disappeared. The eyes seemed to say, 'We are friends, and nothing will part us.' The face seemed to express the most curious mixture of amusement and disappointment, then it vanished.

Muriel got up and went into the house. It felt quite lonely. Muriel sat down, opened her desk, and began to write a letter. Patch and Jackdaw watched her for a few minutes.

'How will you get it posted?' said Jackdaw at last.

'Thomas will take it to the village.'

'And are you really telling mother all about what we have done?'

'Yes; the entire story,' said Muriel. The other two left her.

'I wonder what mother will do,' said Jackdaw. 'I wish Baby hadn't put it in a letter. We had made our plans. We *meant* to be naughty and 'fess afterwards. It is quite a different thing telling mother in a letter. She will make such a fuss. I wish Muriel would not do it.'

Patch said nothing. All of a sudden she made an exclamation.

'Look there!' she said; and coming to meet them up the garden path was no less a person than Snowball—Snowball, with a great scratch across her cheek, and her whole appearance more untidy and more defiant than surely any girl had ever been before.

She walked in a great hurry, and, taking Patch's hand, she said, 'I've runned away, and you must help me.'

'What do you mean by that?' said Patch in great excitement.

'I am not going back, not to-night leastways. I want you to hide me somewhere—not in the house, for they'll search every single bit of your house—but somewhere. You can bring me food, and you are not to tell; you are my great friend. I don't mind that boy—I will fight him if he turns unpleasant; but I want you to hide me.'

'Oh dear!' said Patch. She scarcely knew her own sensations. The excitement of seeing Snowball at their side of the wall, in their garden, was almost past belief. Snowball spoke in an excited whisper.

'It was the Wedgwood that did it,' she said. 'After you went, he called us and called us; and we came to him, and he spoke and spoke. Oh, there is no one like Great-uncle Michael when he is angry! And he said he would put me into the black room for the night. I am not frightened of anything under the sun but the black room, for there never was a window in it; and it seems to me—anyhow, I don't like it—it seems to me that brownies will come and pinch me there. I spent a night there once, and I didn't like it a bit. I want you to keep me instead. I threw a Wedgwood cup at him, and it broke all to smithereens, and then he tried to catch me, but I 'scaped. I hid in a tree for some time, and then I got over the garden wall, and here I am. And be quick—be quick, Patch; put me somewhere! somewhere!'

'There is the island,' said Patch in great excitement. 'There is no other place that is safe enough. But there is the island; we'll take you across in a boat. Are you frightened of spending all the night alone on the island?'

'Not one little bit,' said Snowball. 'Come along, I say, that is scrumptious; I never thought of that!'

The three children quite forgot Baby's letter, and ran down to the edge of the lake. There was the boat, the pretty boat, painted a light and delicate blue, with its blue oars tipped with white, all ready for the children to step into and enjoy themselves.

'We are not allowed in the boat without Thomas,' said Patch.

'Thomas!' cried Snowball in a tone of great contempt. 'Thomas is one of your men, isn't he? You must not let *him* into the secret! Row me over in the boat, or rather I will row myself, and you can row back again. You know how to manage the oars, don't you?'

'Yes, oh yes,' said Patch; 'but Babs'——

'You must be quick; if you don't do it in a hurry you may as well not do it at all,' said Snowball. 'I tell you I won't spend the night in that black room. I won't! I won't!'

She stamped in her excitement.

'You sha'n't, you poor, poor little Snowball!' said Patch.

They unhooked the boat from its moorings, and all three got in. It was easy enough to take Snowball across to the island, which was only about two or three hundred yards from the shore; for Snowball herself plied the oars, and could manage them well.

At last they reached the desolate little plot of land which was called by this name. It was all

full of sedge and undergrowth, and was as dreary and uninteresting a spot as could be found. Snowball leaped from the boat, and laughed with delight as she did so.

'Now I am safe enough,' she said. 'One of you will have to row over presently with some sort of supper for me. Anything will do. You might steal a fowl and an apple-tart from the kitchen. I know a place where I will sleep snug enough, and Great-uncle Michael may search and search, but he won't find me in my hiding-place. That is all right. And now, on no account whatever let out to mortal what you have done; only you have promised to come back with my supper.'

'Yes—if we *can*,' said Patch, a little doubtful.

She looked at the boat and the oars, and the garden in the distance, and the blue water of the lake which lay between. It seemed such a little, little way to go, and yet so difficult when you had not the slightest idea how to manage.

'Suppose we never get back!' said Patch, all of a sudden.

Snowball began to laugh.

'You don't mean to tell me that you don't know how to row?'

'Yes, I can manage,' said Patch.

'I dare not be seen on the water,' said Snowball, 'or I would row you back myself and wait till you brought me some supper, and take the boat and hide it at my side of the island. But it would

be much safer to have it moored at your side; for Great-uncle Michael would be desperate; he is in one of his worst moods to-night. He has got to punish me. When he once gets it into his head that I have got to be punished there is no rest for any one until it is done. Well, I guess that Nora and Dandy and Roger will have a bad time of it to-night. Never mind—never mind; this is fun! Now, jump into the boat, the two of you, and don't forget to bring me back my supper.'

Patch promised, but she never felt so frightened in her life. Jackdaw took an oar, and so did she, and by dint of vigorous directions on the part of Snowball herself, who superintended their operations from the shore of the island, they managed to get across.

Fortunately the sun was still high in the heavens, the day was cloudless, and the lake like a mirror. The little boat was drawn up on the beach in due course, and the oars shipped in proper fashion. Then the two children turned and faced each other.

'We have done it now,' said Jackdaw. 'Seems to me that the hiding of Snowball is about the worst thing of all, and we must get her some supper; she would die if she was left to starve till the morning.'

'There is one thing certain sure: we mustn't let Baby know about this,' said Patch.

'Oh no, of course not; she would cry all night,' said Jackdaw.

They walked slowly up towards the house; they really felt quite burdened with their cares. There was Snowball on the island—Snowball with nothing whatever to eat—and there was Baby in the house writing a letter to mother, in which she was confessing all her naughtiness with regard to the Scamp Family.

'It is very puzzling,' said Patch. 'It is so puzzling that it makes one's head ache a tiny bit.'

'It 's the sort of thing that happens to people when they seek adventures,' said Jackdaw. 'It is very exciting, isn't it?'

'Yes, very.'

'You and I,' said Jackdaw, in a low, mysterious whisper, 'will have to creep out of our beds in the dead of night, and steal food from the pantry, and go in the boat over to the island to poor Snowball. That will be an adventure worth having!'

'Yes, won't it?' said Patch.

'I am man enough to go through it,' said Jackdaw.

'And I am woman enough,' said Patch.

They looked at each other very solemnly, and shook hands on the spot. They had nearly reached the house, when Baby, pale, with traces of tears still round her eyes, met them. She held in her hand a letter.

'This is to mother,' she said. 'I have told her everything. I have begged of her to come back to-morrow, and I think she will. I feel better

now. We must have nothing more to do with the Scamp Family until mother returns. I wish I could find Thomas; he ought to take it at once to the post, or it won't be in time.'

'I will go and look for him,' said Patch. 'Give me the letter and I will tell him to run with it immediately to the village.'

Baby gave her sister the letter.

'I will go with you,' said Jackdaw.

'No, Jackdaw, stay with me,' said Baby; 'I want to talk to you.'

So Patch ran off by herself. Now, Patch's little heart was beating hard. She had never made a real, what she called 'adventure,' friend before. Snowball represented danger, troubled times, all those excitements so dear to youth. If that letter to mother was posted, poor Snowball would perhaps be discovered. Mother would probably return the next day, and it would be quite impossible to keep things from mother. Other people might question, and you might, by a great effort, manage to deceive them; but not your own mother. Own mother had a look in her eyes which drew the truth from her child.

'I could not face her,' thought Patch. 'She must not have the letter; oh, she must not—she must not! I must manage it somehow!'

She wandered about the garden and pretended to look for Thomas. To her relief, however, he was nowhere in sight. She waited until she knew

that the last post had gone out from the village, then she returned to Jackdaw and Baby.

Baby said at once, 'Well, did you find him, and is the letter posted?'

'I am very sorry I couldn't see him anywhere,' said Patch.

'But why didn't you come back? We might all three of us have gone to the village ourselves. It would, of course, have been disobeying Miss Peters; but I don't think dear Peters, under the circumstances, would have blamed us much. Now I have missed the post; it is too bad! Well, give me the letter anyhow, Patch. I will send it off somehow to-night, and mother will get it to-morrow.'

'She won't be able to come back to-morrow, will she?' said Patch.

'No, I am afraid not now; it is too provoking. Patch, I can't think what is the matter with you. Why couldn't you return when you couldn't find Thomas?'

'I spent all my time looking for him,' said Patch; which was partly true and partly the reverse, for her one desire had been not to find him, and all her thoughts had been occupied with the solitary, wicked, black-eyed Snowball on the island.

It was just then that a fresh event occurred; for no other than two people—servants from the Scamp Family—walked up the avenue, and inquired if the child who went by the name of Snowball was any-

where to be found on the premises. Babs answered at once, with great innocence, that none of the family were with them. The servants—two men—said that they had instructions to search the grounds everywhere. Baby remarked, in a lofty tone, that they could do what they pleased.

The men proceeded with investigations. They then asked if they might come into the house and look there. They were both rather frightened-looking people, and were evidently as anxious not to find Snowball as they pretended to be desirous to secure her. Babs told them they could go through the house. They did so in a perfunctory manner, and then, begging the young ladies' pardon, went back again to their master.

'Dear, dear,' said Babs, 'what a frightfully naughty child that is! I suppose she is hiding somewhere.'

'I expect Great-uncle Michael is a rather terrible person when he is roused; don't you think so?' said Patch.

'I don't know,' said Muriel. 'I can only say one thing: I am exceedingly sorry that we disobeyed father and mother and went to the other side of the wall. We have been punished. We must think no more of the Scamp Family, but attend in future to our own concerns. Ah, here comes dear Miss Peters! It is refreshing even to look at her after our day of terrible adventure.'

'You won't tell Peters anything, will you?' said Patch in a low and very anxious voice.

'No,' replied Muriel, 'not until mother knows; and I have sent the letter to the post, so she will get it sometime to-morrow evening. Now let us come into the house to supper.'

During supper Patch could not help examining the contents of the table. Willy-nilly, she must purloin some of those tempting eatables, and pack them into a basket and convey them, with Jackdaw's aid, across that expanse of water to Snowball in the dead of night. It would be by no means an easy task to perform. It was difficult to manage the boat in broad daylight, but at night it would be almost impossible. Nevertheless, the deed must be done; at any risk, Snowball must be saved the pain of dying of starvation. For such a very fat and very greedy girl as Snowball to have to do without her food until the following morning seemed to Patch to mean instant death to her new friend. The thing could not be permitted for a minute.

The little girl sat very silent, therefore, during supper; so much so that Miss Peters asked her if she was tired. She replied in the affirmative, and the governess told her that she could go to bed when she liked. How glad Patch was that she had a little room all to herself! She went up to it now and sat down by her bedside. After a time she lay down without undressing, covering herself

well up with the bedclothes, and intending, of course, to remain wide awake. As a matter of fact, she fell asleep almost instantly, slept for what seemed to her long hours, and awoke with a great start and trembling violently.

The moonlight was filling the little room, and the whole house was still. Now was the time to creep softly out of bed, to go to Jackdaw's room, to wake him; and then for the two little adventurers to steal downstairs, to purloin some food, and go out into the summer night intent on some dangerous exploit.

CHAPTER VI.

MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE.

PATCH felt dreadfully frightened as she let herself out of her bedroom. She had never done such a thing before, and knew that she was now so desperately naughty that there was no ordinary punishment severe enough for her. It was only the thought of poor Snowball waiting for her on the island, and starving—yes, starving for want of food!—that made the little girl resolve to go through the task she had undertaken. And, of course, Jackdaw would help; it would be absolutely impossible for her to unmoor the boat and row it across to the island without Jackdaw's help. She knew well that, even with Jackdaw, the danger was extreme. The first thing she must, therefore, do was to waken her little brother and get him to come with her.

All had been arranged beforehand by the children. Jackdaw would lie down, dressed as he was, and when Patch gave a faint little tap at his door would immediately jump up and accompany her down to the larder. There they would fill a basket with the sort of things they hoped cook would never miss, and then, gliding out of one of the downstairs windows, would make off as fast as

they could to the boathouse. Oh yes, they were desperately naughty; but they had promised Snowball—poor starving Snowball!—and must not forsake her.

But now—as Patch stood, a solitary and it must be owned very frightened figure, with the moonlight streaming all over her, in the corridor which led to Jackdaw's room—a dreadful and unexpected thing happened, for from within the room came the sound of voices. The voices were quite loud, and the following words fell distinctly on Patch's ear:

'If you are in such bad pain, Jackdaw, you must take this medicine.' This was Miss Peters's voice.

'Oh Jackdaw!' thought poor Patch. 'What have you done, Jackdaw, to make yourself ill just when I want you so terribly badly?'

Jackdaw was sobbing, and Patch now heard him say, 'The pain is so bad it sort of doubles me up.'

The next instant she heard steps approaching the door. In a moment she had fallen back, not into the shelter of her own little bedroom (for she could not have reached it without betraying herself), but into a small, dark cupboard which stood partly open on the landing. She crouched down, and as she did so she saw Miss Peters pass, holding a candle in her hand. One of the servants was with her, and Miss Peters was saying, 'If he isn't better soon I shall have to send for the doctor.'

Her steps died away as she was speaking, and

Patch found herself alone in the darkness. She had no time to consider Jackdaw's suffering; all her mind was absorbed in the thought of Snowball and in what she herself would have to do. How could she manage this great, this terrible expedition without Jackdaw's aid? Manage it she must, somehow; but, oh, how? To Patch it seemed that for any little girl to do without food from the middle of the day before until the following morning would be, in all probability, death from sheer starvation. Poor Patch! The tears ran from her eyes as she pictured Snowball getting fainter and fainter on the island, more and more hungry, her little 'tummy' more and more empty. Patch pressed her hand against that little organ in her own body, and made softly under her breath an agonised moan.

'She must have food; I must take it to her,' thought the little girl. 'I don't care if it is the wickedest thing on earth. I will take food to Snowball, or else she will die!'

Presently the footsteps died away. Silence once more reigned in the corridor, and, but for the distant sound of Jackdaw's expostulation as the necessary medicine was administered to him, all was still. Now was Patch's time. She ran swiftly downstairs. Through the dark passage she went, until at last she reached that part of the house devoted to the kitchen premises.

There was a moon in the sky, and this moon

acted now as a candle to guide poor Patch's steps. She had never noticed before how queer things looked by moonlight. The kitchen seemed to be enormous—full of black, black shadows in some parts, and full of intensely bright lights in others. But, fortunately, in the part which was most brilliantly lit up was the door which led to the pantry. This door was slightly ajar. In a minute Patch had entered; and there—oh, joy!—was food: a rich plum-cake cut up already into slices, a pie half-eaten and looking quite delicious, some apples, and some bread and butter. In a minute Patch had made her selection: plum-cake (of course she would have that, for well did she know how Snowball loved it), a little bread, a thick slice from the fruit tart—but, oh! why would the juice drop about so dreadfully?—and, finally, a great piece of butter and a handful of apples. A basket stood near. How kind of it to have got itself into the pantry!

The things were quickly packed; and then Patch returned hastily from the kitchen, never guessing that the juice from the tart was betraying her all the way, was smearing her frock, and falling in large drops on to her shoes and stockings. She and Jackdaw had already arranged what window they were to go out by. It was easily opened, and a minute later the little girl found herself in the outside world.

The night was a delicious one, and with the

moon rising high in the sky it seemed nearly as bright as daytime. Patch had never been out at this hour before, and, notwithstanding the wild beating of her heart, she enjoyed herself. But for the thought of the starving Snowball she would have lingered for a little in the garden, for her own small figure made such funny shadows, and all the trees and flowers and plants looked at once so beautiful and so strange.

'I might be in Fairyland,' thought the child. 'I might be "Alice in the Looking-Glass," with fresh adventures in front of me. Oh! I do hope I sha'n't see the Cheshire Cat; she would make me scream.'

But there was no cat or animal of any sort in sight, and the plants and flowers and trees alone seemed to be alive. They seemed to stretch out kindly hands to Patch, and to encourage her to come into their midst. They seemed to whisper to her, 'Come this way, and we will show you the real Fairyland; this is the time when we enjoy ourselves.' And Patch would have lingered—for she was a very romantic little girl, and at that moment firmly believed in fairies—but for the thought of Snowball. Fairies or no fairies, Snowball's failing strength must be supported by rich plum-cake.

Presently Patch had reached the edge of the lake; and now, for the first time, her real difficulties began. It had been almost impossible for Jackdaw and Patch, between them, to manage the

boat on the previous evening. How could Patch, all alone now, by any possibility contrive to row herself across to the island where Snowball was hiding? She sat down by the edge of the water, with her basket placed well in front of her, and thought. She wondered if Snowball could see her.

The island looked very dark, for it was, from where Patch stood, completely in shadow. Even a little girl dressed all in white—a poor, little, weak, starved girl—could not be seen in the midst of that blackness. Patch owned to herself that she did not like it. It was all very well to row across to the island in the daytime, with the sun shining on the water; but to go there now was a very different matter. Suppose Patch could not manage the boat, and suppose she drifted and drifted with the tide! Of course there was no real tide; but there was a very strong current in the centre of the lake, and the children had before now been warned of its danger.

The lake was in itself a fairly big one; and if you happened to get into the current you would be taken very fast down, down, until you reached a river, and when you did this you went faster still. There were people before now who had got into this current, and who were drowned!

Patch shivered as she remembered this story. Tom had told Jackdaw and Baby and herself all about it one day when he was out with them on the lake. The lake had been lovely on that occa-

sion, just as smooth as a looking-glass; and if you bent over the edge of the boat you could see down, down into the lovely blue water, and in some parts could see water-lilies and other water-plants coming up from the bottom to meet you. Patch remembered one most exquisite white water-lily especially, which she tried to grab as Tom rowed them past. It was then that Tom had told her to sit quiet, and had begun the story of the children who, going out alone in the boat, had tried to pick water-lilies, and then something had happened.

'Oh, it was a dreadful story!' thought poor Patch to herself; for the children had dropped an oar which they could not reach again, and so a strong current in the lake had caught their little boat and whirled them away, away into the river, and one of them was drowned. It was the poor little girl who had tried to pick a water-lily. Patch had cried at the time, or at least tears had come to her eyes. She was dreadfully ashamed of them, and did not want either Baby or Jackdaw to notice; but, lo and behold! when she raised her head, just as the tears had dried themselves up, she saw that Baby had been crying much harder, and that Jackdaw was very red about the face and looked—well, to say the least of it, queer.

'Why *do* I think of that story now?' thought Patch. 'Oh dear, dear! I ought to have courage. I won't be frightened of anything. There's Snowball starving, and we faithfully promised to take

her food. I must get the boat out and go to the island somehow.'

It was just at this moment that something happened. It was the sort of thing that might make a small girl scream; for out of the extreme darkness—not to say blackness—on the island there came one clear note.

'Hi!' said the note. Poor Patch did jump! She did not know that although she could not see Snowball—Snowball being in the shadow—Snowball herself could notice the little figure with the moonlight shining over her.

'Jump into the boat and come along at once!' shrieked Snowball.

Patch immediately got over her fright; she was no longer alone. Her heart, which had beat so very fast, now became tranquil.

'I am so glad you are alive!' she shouted back.

'I am dying as hard as I can!' answered Snowball back. 'What an age you have been! I'll thump you if you're not quick! Get into the boat and bring me my food!'

Patch immediately went up to the boathouse. The boat was moored to the little quay. The boathouse was seldom locked. She would have to go there to fetch the oars. Patch had often accompanied Tom when he went down to the water to unmoor the boat, and she felt proud now that she knew exactly what to do. But, lo and

behold! an unexpected difficulty met her, for, although the door of the boathouse was only on the latch, and the oars could easily be obtained, the boat itself was padlocked securely by an iron chain to a large iron ring on a little stage or landing-place. Try hard as Patch would, she could no more drag the boat from its moorings than she could fly.

'I can't!' she shouted back to Snowball. 'The boat is chained. It's padlocked, and there's no key. What am I to do?'

'Who padlocked it?' shrieked Snowball.

'I suppose Tom did,' replied Patch.

'I am just dying!' said Snowball again. 'I'll be dead in a minute! This is about my last shriek. Go and find that Tom and bring him here at once. Don't lose a minute; this is my very last shriek. I'm about gone. Be quick! be quick!'

'Oh Snowball, Snowball! you sha'n't die,' answered Patch. Echo took up the words, and 'You sha'n't die' seemed to come back from no one knew where.

'There must be fairies about, there must, there must,' thought poor Patch. 'But, oh!' she added to herself, 'I am not really frightened about anything at all now. I want just to save Snowball. Oh Snowball! you sha'n't, you sha'n't die.'

She put her basket down on the ground, and, without any further thought of herself, began to

run up the avenue in the direction of the house where Tom lived.

Now, Tom, who was fifteen years of age, and a very well-grown boy for his years, was at that moment sleeping the sound sleep of healthy youth, and snoring lustily in the little house which formed the lodge of the old place. The avenue was long, and Patch, who was really only half-dressed, found the gravel hurting her feet in her very thin house-slippers. But she was really hardly conscious of pain, so terribly anxious was she about Snowball. Oh, why was the avenue so long, and why was it a little uphill, and why did her heart beat so uncomfortably hard as she rushed over the road?

At last the little gabled roof and the house itself, covered with honeysuckle and creepers of every sort, appeared in view. Patch had not the slightest idea which was Tom's room; if she had she would have had recourse to the time-honoured expedient of flinging gravel at the window. Not knowing his room, however, there was nothing to be done but to rouse the house. Accordingly, she seized a rope which happened to hang near the door. This rope communicated with a big rusty bell. The bell began to sound, and immediately, to poor Patch's terror, the whole place seemed to be alive. Heads popped out of windows; voices said, 'Who's there? What is the matter?' and as poor little Patch herself was hidden in the deep porch of the front door, and as the bell, once it

began to ring, seemed not to have the slightest intention of stopping, all the inquiries remained unanswered.

Finally, Tom himself appeared. He had hastily half-dressed, and came down looking very fierce and wild.

'Now, what's up?' he said. 'My faythe'r 'ull give it to any o' you who have played him a nasty joke, ringin' the alarm-bell. Where be you? I'll shake the breath out o' your bodies.'

'Oh, please, please don't, Tom!' said Patch, laying a trembling hand on his arm.

'What!' said Tom. 'What—missie! Then there *be* some'at wrong.'

'Yes, oh yes,' said Patch; 'only stop the bell, please do. I can't talk to you while it is making such a clamour. And please, please, Tom,' continued Patch, putting her arm round his neck and managing to shout in his ear, 'don't let anybody else know. You're the only one in all the world who can help me now.'

'Lor', missie! be that the case?' said Tom, immensely flattered. 'You sit there, missie, and I'll be back with yer in a trivet.'

Tom rushed on to the roof and held the old bell until it became quiet, and then he dashed into his father's room.

'Did yer catch them scoundrels, or is it a real alarm?' said the head gardener.

'I'm after them this minute, and there's nothin'

in life to be frightened o',' said Tom. 'You go off to your sleep, faythe r.—Mother, I am sorry as you got a fright, but there's nothin' at all. I have one o' those brats tied by the leg downstairs; he'll catch it from me.'

'Give it to him hot,' said the gardener; 'and, Tom, you ought to catch it hot yourself for leavin' the rope o' the alarm-bell danglin' down in that sort o' fashion.'

Tom made no response. He rushed down to Patch.

'Now it's all right,' he said, 'and no one 'ull ever think it's you, missie, has riz the house in the way you a done. And now, wot's up, missie?'

'Oh Tom, I am so terrified! It's Snowball. She is dead.'

'Lawk-a-mercy!' said Tom. 'Whoever be she? A cat perhaps?'

'No, no, no!' said Patch, who began to cry in her agitation. 'She is a girl—my greatest, very greatest friend. She's the round, black-eyed girl who lives over the garden wall. She's one of the Scamp Family, Tom.'

'Never heerd o' 'em,' said Tom.

'Well, at any rate, she is a girl, and she's starving on the island; she was dying when I left it to run for you, and she is dead by now, I'm afraid. Oh, let's hurry! let's hurry!'

'To be sure, miss. What a truly awful thing!'

said Tom. 'A young lady on the island! You don't mean in the middle o' the lake, now?'

'Yes. She is there; she was desperate naughty, poor thing! and had to run away, and Jackdaw and I, we hid her on the island, and she's nearly dead now for want of you. Oh Tom! why did you padlock the boat?'

'You don't mean to tell me,' said Tom, 'that you, missie, wanted to go along to the island alone in the boat in the dead o' night?'

'Yes, but I did. I wouldn't have woke you —indeed, indeed I wouldn't—if you hadn't put the padlock on. Why *did* you do it?'

'It's a right good thing I did,' said Tom; 'for *ef* I hadn't there 'ud a been two dead uns, not one, by the time the mornin' broke. Oh missie, to think on it! Why, you'd a run a most awful danger. And how could you a seen where to land, even ef you had gone across, when the whole island was in blackness? The boat would a been upsot, miss, when you were tryin' to get out o' it, and then where would you ha' been? Oh, my word! I be glad as I padlocked *Ladybird* up.'

Patch felt terribly oppressed.

'So am I glad too,' she said in a low tone. 'Tom, you are a great, wonderful hero; I admire you like anything. I love you dearly, Tom.'

'Does you, miss? Well, I am sure I am obleeged.'

'And, Tom, can't we go a little faster?'

'To be sure, missie; we'll run if you like.'

'Oh, do, dear Tom!'

Tom took Patch's hand, and they flew over the ground. But soon the small girl found that she could not keep up with Tom, who was so big and so very strong, being, indeed, a man to her, for she was but a little girl.

'It hurts,' she said with a gasp.

'Poor missie! In course you can't run like me.'

'Tom, stop a minute. I've got such a frightful pain in my side.'

'Let me carry yer, missie?' said Tom. 'I could as easy as winkie.'

Patch for a minute refused, but the thought of the dying Snowball made her change her mind; and soon, comfortably ensconced in Tom's strong arms, she recovered her breath and felt much better.

'How very strong you are, Tom!' she said.

'I ain't nothin' to speak on,' said Tom. 'My fayther says that I'll never make the man he be.'

'Anyhow, you're a hero,' said Patch.

'Wot's a hero, miss?'

'A person who does something very fine, mostly at the risk of his life.'

'Then I bain't that, for I ain't done nothin' at the risk o' *my* life. It's you, miss, I'm thinkin', wot would ha' been the hero ef you had unmoored *Ladybird*.'

'A girl is called a heroine,' replied Patch. But this distinction was too much for Tom, who remained silent.

After a time they reached the edge of the water, and Tom busied himself unmooring the boat.

'Now we'll fetch the basket,' said Patch. 'Oh Snowball! Snowball!' she shrieked.

'Lor', miss,' said Tom, 'they'll hear yer in the house.'

'I don't care,' said Patch. 'Oh, she is not answering! Oh, oh, she must be dead! Tom, Tom, be quick, be quick!'

'Jump in, missie; I'm ready.'

'But where's the basket, Tom? I must find that first of all.'

'Wherever did yer put it, missie?'

'Oh! I don't know. Yes—here—but it's not here. Tom, what can have happened to it? Snowball! Snowball!' shrieked Patch again.

No reply of any sort. Silence on the island; no basket on the shore.

'Never mind the basket at all now,' said Patch. 'She doesn't want the food, not the 'licious plum-cake, nor the tart, nor nothing at all. She is dead, dead! Oh Tom, Tom!'

'Jump into *Ladybird*, and let's see,' said Tom.

This advice did sound sensible. Tom quickly rowed Patch across to the dark, mysterious island.

He found the little cove where they could easily run the boat aground, and, stepping ashore, lifted Patch on to the island. The island was small, and it did not take many minutes to run round it.

Alas, alas! nowhere was Snowball to be seen.

CHAPTER VII.

GONE!

'WE must find her,' said Patch. 'We must at least find her body. Oh Tom! I am quite sick; I think I'll faint.'

'Not you, missie. Ef you be wot you called a hero-yne, them sort never faints. 'Ere, take my 'and; we'll go round the whole blessed place once again. We're sure to find the young lady somewhere.'

But no. Although they looked into every imaginable corner, and Tom went on his face and hands and explored under holly-bushes and arbutus-shrubs and all kinds and sorts of undergrowth, nowhere was Snowball to be seen. Patch by this time was in absolute despair. She sat down on a stone, covered her face with her hands, and gave way to bitter sobs and cries.

'Oh Snowball! Oh Snowball! And it was my fault; it was all, all my fault!' she kept repeating.

Tom could bear it no longer.

'Now come, missie,' he said; 'even hero-ynes, to my way o' thinkin', ought to 'ave a bit o' sense in 'em somewhere. Wot's the good o' takin' on, miss? The young lady ain't dead at all. 'Ow

could she be dead, miss? Ef she wor, we 'ud find her body.'

'I've thought of something,' said Patch. 'Kneel down, Tom; I'll whisper it to you.'

Tom immediately went on his knees. Patch took one of his strong hands between both her own. But before she could even begin to tell the thought that came to her, the comfort of Tom's presence made itself felt, and Patch could not help crying, 'Oh Tom, what should I do without you now?'

'Well, miss, I am glad as I come along o' yer. To my way o' thinkin', hero-ynes ought never to go out on their lonesome, for they're quite certain to get into mischief; but as to you takin' on as you are doin', you'll just allow me to adwise yer. The young lady ain't dead; she's most like gone away.'

'But, Tom, that is impossible. I tell you she was hiding on the island. She was hiding from an awful ogre; he's a man really, but he's an ogre too, and he's quite the most terrible person that you ever saw. I sometimes think perhaps that he isn't a person at all, but a real ogre. His name is Great-uncle Michael.'

'Lawk!' replied Tom.

'I can't tell you any more about him now, except that anybody would be afraid of him; and poor Snowball was so frightened she ran away, and we hid her here, Jackdaw and I did. We

promised to bring her food, poor darling! but Jackdaw turned ill and I was delayed. She has died for want of it, and the ogre, or maybe it was some bad fairies, have carried her body away. Oh Tom, what shall I do?'

'Now, listen,' answered her consoler. 'You'll forgive me, miss, but I ain't been brought up so childish as you. Wot yer a-tryin' to say is—beggin' yer pardon, miss—nothin' more nor less than tommy-rot. There ain't no fairies, nor no ogres, and young ladies don't die because they're kep' waitin' for their suppers.'

'But she was kept waiting for a very long time,' said Patch.

'It wouldn't kill her, miss, ef she did taste no food at all for a whole day and night, and another night and another day on top o' that.'

'Oh Tom, are you certain?'

'I know it,' said Tom. 'Wunst I ran away myself—it was when I were a little chap. I hid in a wood 'cos faythe threatened to wollop me'——

'What is "to wollop"?' asked Patch.

'Beat me, miss, and 'ard 'e'd do it too. I didn't taste no food for two nights at least and a whole day. It didn't kill me, miss; and a few hours without food wouldn't kill the young lady—'tain't likely. It's gone away she be, and very mean I call it to give you such a wild-goose chase. You see, miss, for yourself that ef she were on the

island we 'ud find her on the island, and by the same token the basket of food that yer brought her is gone too. She's gone 'ome again, miss, that's wot she a done, and you 'ad best follow her example, and in double-quick time.'

Poor Patch listened to these words of wisdom without quite believing them; but as Tom was much older than she, and as he spoke with an air of authority which he would not have dared to assume in the daytime, when he was only the gardener's boy and Patch was one of the young ladies, she now felt forced to obey him. In consequence, he induced her to leave the island and to seat herself once again in the *Ladybird*. He then rowed her back to the shore, and having repadlocked the boat and put the oars away in the boathouse, he proceeded to take Patch's hand and to lead her back to the house.

'However did you get out, miss?' he asked as they approached the side of the old dwelling.

Patch pointed to the window which had been left unfastened, and which was even now slightly open.

'Jackdaw and I left it ready last night. Oh! if Jackdaw had come we would have been in time; but all the same I am awfully obliged to you, Tom, and I do think that if you are not a hero now, you have the makings of one in you. You'll get the Victoria Cross one day, Tom, that's what you'll get.'

'I a heerd tell o' that,' said Tom, 'but it takes a deal o' gettin'; I know all about it. Well, miss, I'd do anythin' in the world for a real hero-yne. And now you'll slip in and go to bed, and don't fret about that young lady, for it was she as give you the slip, and I don't think much o' her, and that's flat.'

'You'll never, never tell?' was Patch's last speech to Tom.

'I?' said Tom. 'Fire wouldn't get it out o' me; it's sunk down deep in my buzzum, miss, and it'll never come up again.'

Patch now gently climbed back into the house, and Tom shut down the window with such care that it did not make the slightest noise. The house was quite quiet, and Jackdaw was probably asleep. Patch, step by step, a very weary, terribly exhausted little girl, crept up to her own room. She lay down in her little white bed, saying to herself, 'Oh! I know Tom is wrong. Snowball is dead, and the wicked fairies have taken her. I know I shall never see Snowball any more. Oh! I can't sleep; I shall never sleep again.'

But as the thoughts came to Patch's brain and the words formed themselves on her lips, those said lips being much too tired to utter them aloud, kind sleep came and spread a mantle over her, and then took her in the softest of all arms and rocked her into forgetfulness.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO SAVE SNOWBALL.

TOM would not have been a human boy at all if his night of adventure with Patch had not greatly excited him. His young heart was in a state of fervour, and he felt that there was nothing under the sun he would not have done for that wonderful 'hero-yne' who had come to him to deliver her from her trouble. Above everything, he must be most careful not to let out the secret of who really rang the alarm-bell, and who really called him from his warm bed in the dead of night. All the things that had happened during that most eventful time must be locked up in his own breast.

He slept rather later than usual the next morning, and was wakened by his father with a sound cuff on the ear.

'Get up, you lazy-bones!' he said. 'Ef you don't I'll wollop yer!'

Tom was old enough now not to dread the said wolloping. He sprang up, washed and dressed, and was out with his father in the garden soon after seven o'clock. There was a new light in his eyes and a new feeling in his heart. Patch's behaviour had altogether raised poor Tom, and he

had an earnest desire to be good enough to deserve the kindness of such a dear little lady. All things considered, it was probably just as well for Patch that she had called Tom to her aid, for such a friend was by no means to be despised.

About ten o'clock on the following morning Tom was working at the Messagers' side of the garden wall. He was looking from time to time at a lovely peach-tree where the fruit was giving grand promise, and he was wondering which particular peach he might first manage to secure in order to offer it as a special dainty to Patch, when he suddenly saw a head pop up over the wall, and a girl with very fair hair and a remarkably pretty face look down at him.

Tom started and coloured. He had never seen any of the children of the Scamp Family before. The girl looked hard at him, and then bobbed down her head, and for a time there was absolute silence. Then Tom heard, or fancied he heard, footsteps at the other side of the wall, and there was suddenly conveyed to him the buzzing sound of voices whispering. Then the same girl appeared once more, but this time she held a basket.

'Are you,' said the girl, 'the gardener's boy?'

'I be that, miss,' answered Tom.

He felt almost angry. Was he not much more than the gardener's boy? Was he not in reality

the hero of the most fascinating 'hero-yne' in the world?

'I be, miss,' he repeated; and now he pulled his forelock and looked rather sheepish, for the girl's eyes were brimful of mirth.

'Here!' she said the next minute; and she hauled within sight a basket. 'Catch!' she said. She threw the basket into Tom's extended hands.

'Take that to the house,' she said; 'and if you can do it quietly and without any one noticing, so much the better. I wonder if you're the sort of boy who can be trusted.'

'*Yus*, miss,' said Tom. There was nothing more to be said; 'Yus, miss,' summed up the entire situation.

'Then,' said the girl, 'if you possibly can see Miss Patch—I think she calls herself—please tell her that the basket is returned, that Snowball is safe and—locked up, and that Great-uncle Michael is going to visit the Messagers this morning. Try, boy, to convey this information to her without the others hearing. She'll know what's best to be done, but you may tell her from me, if you like, that I wouldn't be in her shoes for a good deal.'

With the last words the fair-haired girl disappeared, and Tom was left standing at the side of the wall with the basket at his feet.

'This be a rum go!' he muttered twice under his breath.

'Tom, you lazy-bones!' called his father from a little distance, 'what be yer up to now? Stir yerself a bit, and cart away all them stones and weeds. Fetch a wheelbarrow, and be quick. I never see you in so queer a mood in all my life before.'

'Yus, fayther,' said Tom; 'I be a-comin' of.'

But he still stood absolutely motionless, with the basket at his feet.

'Much a-comin' of you be,' said the angry gardener, approaching as he spoke. 'You look as ef you was sunstruck—as dazed as a donkey; and whatever, in the name o' fortune, are yer doin' with that basket?'

'The basket were guv to me by a little miss at t'other side o' wall,' said Tom. 'I'm to take it to the house, she says, and a message along with it. I won't be gone a minute, fayther.'

Before the gardener could interfere Tom had shaken himself out of his stupor, had taken up the basket, and was rushing helter-skelter in the direction of the house. The gardener scratched his head as he saw his son disappear.

'Well, I never!' he muttered under his breath. 'Whatever has tuk Tom? He's as queer as though he was sickenin' for some illness. But there! boys is kittle cattle, and you can't make nothin' o' 'em, howsumdever hard you try.'

Meanwhile, Tom, on his way to the house, had the great good fortune to find Patch coming out.

Patch had so far been successful with regard to her adventure. Her proceedings of the night before had not been suspected by either Miss Peters or Baby. As to Jackdaw, he was better, but still in bed. Patch had not yet seen Jackdaw. As a matter of fact, she was rather afraid of going to him. She had slept soundly and for a time forgotten her troubles; but when she awoke they were very present with her, and it was a truly miserable little girl whom Tom suddenly encountered coming out of the house by a side-entrance. Tom blushed all over when he saw Patch. Was she not his beautiful, his dear little 'hero-yne'? Hitherto he had scarcely regarded her as anything special. She was just a nice little lady, one of the three children whom in a measure he took care of during the summer months. But now that she was raised to the position of a 'hero-yne' all was altered.

'Oh Tom!' said Patch.

'Oh missie!' cried Tom. 'Ain't I in luck just to ha' met you! Here's your basket back, miss. It were handed to me over the garden wall by a young lady with fair 'air and a sort o' wonderful look about her; and she left you a message, miss. The message were this: that Snowball was safe, and that a body she calls Great-uncle Michael is coming here as fast as ever he can. Oh missie!' continued Tom, 'and that's the message — the whole on it; and I'm jest as sorry as sorry can

be to 'ave to give it to yer, but there's no 'elp for it, missie. You're to look out for trouble, and that's truth; but if I can 'elp yer, I will.'

'Thank you, Tom; thank you,' said Patch. 'I dare say I shall want your help, and if I do I'll ask for it. But go away now, please; I must think about this. Great-uncle Michael—he must be terribly angry.'

'Yus, miss,' said Tom; 'it do sound as though he were turr'ble angry!'

'Well,' said Patch, 'I am not a coward, whatever I am; but there's Baby, and there's Jackdaw—and, oh dear! what shall I do? You must leave me for the present, Tom; please do! I've got to think, and there is not a minute to lose.'

Tom disappeared, it must be owned somewhat slowly and unwillingly. Where was the use of having a 'hero-yne' if he, a hero, could not help her? Patch stood quite still under the shadow of the trees. One thing was certain: she must brave Great-uncle Michael; and in order to do this she must see him alone. She had not time to consult with Jackdaw; she did not wish to consult with Baby. Baby, who had never from the very first approved of stolen visits to the Scamp Family, would be certain now to recommend wholesale confession.

Now, Patch did not want to confess. Above all things, she did not want Snowball to get into further trouble. She could not possibly tell what

Great-uncle Michael wanted, but she must have an interview with him; that was the only thing. Accordingly, she boldly and determinedly made up her mind not to return to the schoolroom when lessons recommenced. She would tell no lies about the matter; she would simply disappear. Miss Peters and even Baby might search for her, but she did not think they could possibly find her until after her interview with Great-uncle Michael, and then things would not matter so much. Patch considered she was in luck to be alone. Under ordinary circumstances the Messager children would be together. But now Jackdaw was in bed, not at all very ill, but just a little ill, and Baby had run up to sit with him, and Miss Peters was busy interviewing the cook. Yes; Patch had her chance, and she was quick to put it into execution. Of one thing at least she was certain: Great-uncle Michael would not approach the Messager house over the garden wall. He would come round by the road; he would in all probability drive. To drive, he must approach the gates. Patch therefore, quick as thought, ran up the avenue. As she did so she remembered her run of the preceding night. How heavily she had panted then for breath! How steep the road had seemed! How long and toilsome the way! It was steep now, with the sunshine over it, and long too. But it seemed, all the same, to Patch quite a different road from that sort of

fairy road which her footsteps had pressed on the preceding night. Then there was dew on the grass, and the flowers and shrubs looked unnaturally tall and clever and knowing, as though they each and all held unutterable secrets which they would reveal if they but dared. In the daytime the poor flowers and shrubs had a drooping, never-me-care, uninteresting sort of appearance. That was their time of do nothing. At night was their time of do something. Patch made up her mind that outdoor things were only worth considering when they really came alive in the moonlight.

She reached the gates at last, a very tired, dusty, hot little girl. Patch was never a very pretty child, and she certainly did not look her best now as she stood leaning up against the gates and wondering if Tom's mother would come out of the lodge and say something about the alarm-bell, and what a state of terror she had been in on the preceding night. Patch felt sure that if this were the case she would colour crimson, and Tom's mother would suspect her, and the complicated state of things would get still more complicated.

But she had little time to reflect on these thoughts, for her instincts were right with regard to Great-uncle Michael. He was not coming over the garden wall. He was approaching the Messagers' house by the road. He was not arriving, however, in any grand equipage; he was

coming in a basket-chair drawn by a donkey; and a rough-looking boy, with red hair, who might have been Tom, but was not half as good-looking, was leading the donkey by the head.

They pulled up abruptly at the gates, and Great-uncle Michael said, 'Hi!' in a loud voice. As he spoke he pointed towards the lodge with his gold-headed cane, and immediately a woman very like Tom rushed out and opened the gates wide, and the donkey and basket-chair and fierce old man and red-headed boy entered.

Patch stood transfixed to the ground for a moment. She had made up her mind that Great-uncle Michael would come in a carriage, with a pair of spanking horses and everything in great and terrible style; and she had further made up her mind that in order to interrupt proceedings and save her brother and sister and help Snowball, although she had not the least idea how she was to help one of them, she would fling herself in front of the horses' feet, and so force the carriage to draw up and force Great-uncle Michael to listen to her. But it would be a very silly thing to throw herself in front of the patient donkey's feet, for the donkey seemed hardly inclined to move at all. Patch had therefore to alter her tactics. Taking her courage in her hand, she came boldly forward.

'Great-uncle Michael,' she said, 'I want to speak to you.'

'Hi! ho!' was the response. 'Who dares to call me Great-uncle Michael?'

'I do,' said Patch stoutly, ''cause I don't know you by any other name. You are Snowball's Great-uncle Michael, and I want to speak to you about her.'

'And if I may venture to ask you, miss,' inquired the old man, with scathing civility, 'what have you to say of my very troublesome niece Snowball?'

'Please,' said Patch in a very earnest tone, 'what are you going down to the house for? The house is our house, and what do you want to see us about? If you don't want to see us about Snowball, and about me, and about the basket, and about what happened last night, why, it don't matter at all. But if you want to see any one of us on those matters, I am the one for you to talk to; so you needn't get the boy with the red hair to take the donkey another step farther, for I can tell you just everything.'

'Ha! ho!' said Great-uncle Michael, 'you're a queer little miss. Now, just to think of your interrupting me and talking in this silly fashion! I want to see your mother or your father, or whoever has authority over you. I am sick to death of children who have their own way in everything. I want to find a father or mother who has got control over his or her children, and I want that father or mother to take you—you, Miss—

Miss—Patch, for I hear that is your extraordinary name, and whip you well—yes, well; and then put you into a dark room, and get you to understand that you have been a very wicked little girl, and that you are to be punished the same as Snowball is punished.'

'Oh!' said Patch, turning white; 'but is Snowball in a dark room, and have you whipped her?'

'You ask her that when you see her,' said Great-uncle Michael, and his eyes flashed with a dreadful sort of triumph. The next minute he raised his voice.

'Hi! you boy, Dan,' he said, 'take the donkey on to the house.'

'No, sir, please,' said Patch; 'there is no manner of use in your doing that, because father and mother are in London, and there's only Miss Peters at home, and she wouldn't whip any of us for any reason. You will have to wait until father and mother come back, and I know neither of them will whip us, 'cause that's not their way; they think the best way to manage children is to be kind to them.'

'Do they indeed?' snorted Great-uncle Michael. 'Then fine specimens they have found in you three getting over my garden wall, indeed, without leave, and having picnics with my scamps. Am I not worried to death with them all?'

'But perhaps that is because you are not kind enough to them,' said Patch, speaking

very bravely, and fixing her eyes on the fierce old man's face.

'Not kind to them!' he retorted. 'You little wicked thing! What do you mean? I suppose I know my own business. Not kind to them, indeed!'

'Well, I don't think you are,' said Patch. 'I think if you was kind—real kind, like my father and mother are to me—that they'd never do dreadful things. Snowball is the bravest girl in the world, but she was frightened of you. She had not done anything so dreadful bad. We were only having a very jolly picnic, and enjoying ourselves like anything; and then you came along, and—and—they was—oh, they scampered off like so many rabbits!'

'Tut! tut!' said Great-uncle Michael. 'What does this mean? Am I to be interrupted in my morning's business by a chit of a child like you? But you did stand up to me even in my own place—all three of you; but that was nothing, of course, to the frightfully impertinent way in which you are standing up to me now.'

'I want you to forgive poor Snowball,' said Patch, who became less and less afraid of this terrific old gentleman each moment. 'She didn't do anything so awful bad.'

'Nothing so bad!' screamed Great-uncle Michael. —'Go on, Dan, to the house!'

'No, please, sir!' said Patch; 'not till I have

finished. There is only Miss Peters for you to see, and she wouldn't punish one of us for the world.'

'You're a dreadful child,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'You're not half as bold-looking as Snowball, but I declare you've got her spirit and you are less of a coward. What I hate about Snowball is her cowardice.'

'But she is the bravest girl in the world,' said Patch.

'Not she; she is a rare coward. She does her sneaking, nasty tricks behind my back. It was she who stole my Wedgwood china, nearly worth its weight in gold, and broke one of the cups, and who took the very best plum-cakes and the best jam and the best food of all sorts out into the garden without my leave.'

'I helped her, you know,' said Patch.

'There you are,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'You are as wicked as she is.'

'Worse, I think,' said Patch calmly.

'I do believe you are right. I ought to lock you into a dark room and give you a taste of the whip.'

'You can't, 'cause I don't belong to you,' said Patch. 'But, oh, please, if you would only try the other way round with Snowball! She ran away 'cause she was frightened of you—well, perhaps I'd run away if I thought you was going to use your stick to me and lock me into a dark

room—and she got us to help her to hide on the island.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed Great-uncle Michael. 'That was a cunning stroke of business, that was! But you were no match for me, neither of you. I soon guessed where her little ladyship had made off to. I arrived on your premises last night, quite late too, and found your basket of provisions. I came in my own boat, however. You don't know, perhaps, that your lake joins our lake, and that I had only to row up the whole way. I did so with the aid of that boy Dan, and I took the provisions, and found Miss Snowball and brought her safely back, and she is undergoing punishment now.'

'Oh, please, if you would only forgive her!'

'Forgive her! Not I! I sha'n't forgive her until you share her punishment—there! If you are willing to get a good taste of the whip, and be locked into a dark room, and to stay all alone for some hours, why, I will consider letting Snowball out at the end of that time, but not otherwise. Now you have my ultimatum.'

'Your ultimatum! What is that?' asked Patch.

'My final word—my very last word. Now then, that is about all I have got to say to you. I need not go on to the house if there is no one at home to receive me. If you choose to submit and be punished as well as Snowball, why, I will forgive

you both when your punishment is over, not otherwise. Those are my last words. Good-bye, Miss Patch. You are a disreputable sort of child; I've no patience with you, or with any of your tribe. I am going back home to look after my other scamps. Dear, dear! for which of my many sins was I inflicted with a whole family of scamps?—Hi! you, Dan, turn back; I am not going on to the house.'

The donkey's head was turned homewards. The basket chair disappeared through the gates, and Patch was left alone.

'An ultimatum!' she repeated under her breath. 'An ultimatum means a last word. What is to be done?'

She walked very slowly back to the house. After lunch that day Patch was allowed to go up to visit Jackdaw.

'I want to see Jackdaw all alone, please,' she said to Miss Peters.

'Very well, Patch,' replied that good lady; 'there is no reason why you shouldn't. I am glad to say that he is better now, but he had a sharp attack of pain last night, and the doctor doesn't wish him to leave his bed for the present. He may get up, however, towards evening, I think. I hope he will be quite recovered by to-morrow, when your dear father and mother are returning home.'

Patch had forgotten this fact; so many exciting

things had happened that it had slipped from her mind. But on the way upstairs she was met by Baby.

'Patch,' said Baby, who, of course, knew nothing of the great adventure of the preceding night, 'the very first thing we must do when darling father and mother return is to tell them about our adventures with the Scamp Family.'

'Oh yes; I suppose so,' said Patch in a listless tone.

'What is the matter with you, Patch dear? You don't look well.'

'Oh, I'm all right,' said Patch. 'A bit tired perhaps.'

'The more I think of it,' said Muriel, 'the more do I blame myself for ever having consented to go over that garden wall. I have gone not only once, but twice; still, I know darling father and mother will forgive us.'

Patch suddenly faced her.

'Why do you think so much of *us?*' she said in an excited voice.

'What do you mean, Patch?'

'Why don't you think also about *them?*'

'About *them?*'

'Yes, about the Scamp Family; aren't they to be pitied? They have no one to help them to be good —no one at all to care about them except that dreadful Great-uncle Michael. And there's Snowball. Oh, oh, Baby, I love Snowball!'

'Poor little Patch!' said Baby. 'But after all, Patch darling, Snowball is really a dreadful child — so disobedient and reckless and — and wild.'

'I'd be the same if I was treated like her,' said Patch. 'I don't see why she shouldn't be helped same as we are helped.'

'And Nora is quite nice too,' said Baby in a reflective voice. 'I have never thought of it from that point of view. Thank you, Patch, for reminding me. But I wish you didn't look quite so pale and tired. Are you sure you are well?'

'Quite, perfectly well,' said Patch slowly.

She went on towards Jackdaw's room; she opened the door, and was much relieved to find her little brother was all alone.

Jackdaw looked eagerly around. When he saw Patch he said, 'Is that you? I was afraid to ask for you. I have been wanting you more than any one else. Please don't ask me how I am. I am lots better; I am quite well, so we can leave all that part out. That silly, horrid pain doubled me up last night, and I had to scream out, and then Peters came, and I could not go to you, and—and—but we needn't talk any more about that. What did you do, Patch? How did you manage without me?'

'Oh, it *is* such a comfort to tell you!' said Patch, getting on the bed and snuggling up close to her

little brother. 'Makes things twice as easy.' And then she proceeded to relate all her adventures of the previous night: her visit to the kitchen, her depredations in the pantry, the basket full of good things which she had taken away with her, her horror and distress when she found the boat was padlocked to the little quay, the voice of Snowball crying to her from the island, her rush up to the lodge to secure the services of Tom, and then her final despair when, after all, she found no Snowball on the island. But the last part of Patch's narrative was the most harrowing of all.

'Poor, poor Snowball!' she said with a sob, 'she's been treated dreadful cruel. She has been whipped like anything, and now she is in a dark room all by her lone self, and—oh Jackdaw! Jackdaw!'

Patch's little voice now sank to a whisper—an impressive whisper, which, nevertheless, was heard with awful distinctness by the little boy in bed.

'He won't let her out; he won't forgive her unless I share her punishment. So, Jackdaw, I am going to do it. I have made up my mind. It's his ultimatum; that means his very last word. You can't change, can you, after you've spoken your last word? So I am going. Baby sha'n't know, nor Peters; but I am going all the same. You won't tell on me, will you, Jackdaw?'

'But you can't stand being whipped. No one ever whipped you yet,' said Jackdaw.

'Yes, I can; 'cause it 'll save Snowball. That 's the only way to let Snowball out. I 'll do it. I am going; you can't prevent me, Jackdaw.'

'No, I can't,' said Jackdaw; 'but I ought to go too. I was not able to help you last night; but I could help you to-day. I 'll be quite well by this evening. Why shouldn't both of us get over the wall and go to the dreadful old man and tell him to punish us both? Why shouldn't us, Patch? Why should I be left out of it? Say, Patch, why should I?'

'Because you are ill,' said Patch very earnestly; 'because even if they didn't miss me at home, they 'd miss you. Because Miss Peters will come to your room to see if you 're quite cosy, and then every one will be so miserable. But if I slip away Tom will help me, and I guess I 'll be back again by the morning; and Snowball, darling Snowball, will be forgiven? You must let me go alone; you must indeed, Jackdaw. And oh, oh, please, you won't fret! For I must be a very poor sort of girl if I couldn't do a thing like that for my great friend.'

'I say,' cried Jackdaw, 'you 're a splendid sort of girl! Whoever else would think of it? Yes, I suppose you are right,' he continued gloomily. 'I am out of what I most wanted to be in, and I suppose I must stay out. But if I loved you before, I

love you fifty times better now, Patch. Oh, I say, Patch, you are a real heroine!'

'Tom calls me a "hero-yne," said Patch, smiling faintly. 'Well, all right. Whether I'm a heroine or whether I am nobody at all, I'm going to save Snowball.'

CHAPTER IX.

ATONEMENT.

THERE was no going over the garden wall on this occasion. Everything had to be quite straightforward and above-board—at least as far as the Scamp Family was concerned. It is true that Muriel Messager—darling, sweet, noble Muriel—must be kept in the dark, and kind Miss Peters must be kept in the dark; but Jackdaw would know, and Tom would know. Oh, what a comfort Tom was to Patch at this crisis of her fate!

After an interview with Jackdaw, she had a long and very exciting one with Tom, and in this interview it was arranged that he was to wait for her somewhere in the grounds about nine that evening, and then—but everything would follow right after that. Everything would follow right; yes, that was true enough, for Patch quite felt that she was doing her duty in taking Snowball's punishment, and so rescuing dear Snowball herself from the terrible plight into which she had been plunged.

Patch did not quite know how she managed to spend the rest of that long and anxious day. She had to avoid being alone with Muriel, who talked

unsuspiciously of the return of their father and mother on the next day, and of what they must all say to them. She avoided being alone with Miss Peters, who was, however, easier to get on with than Baby, for she knew nothing at all, and was, therefore, quite unsuspicious, and could talk on ordinary commonplace subjects, such as the preserving of the peaches and the bottling of the pears for winter use, and the sort of household things which could not be expected to interest little girls of Patch's type.

At last, however, the hour arrived when Patch was to set forth on her mission. She had arranged everything to a nicety, and even with a certain amount of deceit. This she and Jackdaw considered necessary. It could be put into the next day's confession; so, after all, it did not matter so very much. Jackdaw, who had been allowed to sit up for a little, was now in bed and supposed to be asleep, and Patch was supposed also to be asleep in her little room. No one ever disturbed Patch when she went to her room for the night. She was the sort of child who fell into sound and unbroken slumber the moment she laid her round head on her pillow; but Jackdaw, having been ill the night before, would certainly be visited by Miss Peters, just to see that the little boy had no fresh return of the pains which had so frightened the family on the previous night.

At nine o'clock Patch managed to leave her

room unobserved, and unobserved to let herself out of the house. Again it was a moonlit night, and the flowers and trees and shrubs were beginning to wake up and to put on their interesting fairy-like appearance. On another occasion Patch would have given anything to have stayed to talk to them and ask them to whisper their secrets to her. But she had no time now, for Tom was waiting for her in the shrubbery. He came out of the dark shadow as the little girl approached.

'Now, missie,' said Tom, 'here I be, and whatever do you want with me?'

'I want you to walk with me,' replied Patch, 'all round the road to the Scamp Family's gates, and to walk up the avenue with me, and to the hall door, and to wait until I ask if Great-uncle Michael is within.'

'And why am I to do that, my little hero-yne?' asked Tom, gazing rather gloomily at the child.

Patch looked full up at him.

'Because,' she said at last, after a pause, 'you love me, Tom, and I love you, and you would like me to do a very noble thing, and to help my greatest friend in her trouble, and you are strong enough and brave enough not to ask any questions, but just to do what I want. I know you are, Tom; I know you won't ask me anything more.'

'I won't sure-*ly*,' answered Tom, and he said the words in a deep, choky voice.

'Thank you, Tom,' said Patch, and she put her

hand into his. 'I want you to come back for me again in the morning,' she said; 'I want you to be on the steps waiting for me at five o'clock in the morning. Will you, dear Tom?'

'Sure-*ly*,' answered Tom again.

They had now passed out of the Messagers' grounds and were walking along the dusty road, and at last they reached the gates of that place where the Scamp Family resided. Although it was so easy for the Messagers to reach the Scamp Family over the garden wall, it was quite a long way round by the road, and Patch noted this fact to Tom. She noticed, too, how unkempt and ugly the Scamp Family's place looked beside their own, and she pitied Snowball more and more in her heart.

'They 're such a wild lot,' said Tom; 'they ain't the sort as you ought to know, missie.'

'Oh yes, they are, Tom,' said Patch; 'they are the sort I ought to know, and Muriel ought to know, and Jackdaw ought to know. They are the sort of children that want other children to be nice to them. Why, Tom, they would be splendid if they were kindly treated; they have no chance as it is, Tom. Why, do you think that if I only had a Great-uncle Michael to do anything for me I should be a "hero-yne" to you or to anybody else? Do you, Tom?'

''Spect so,' said Tom. ''Spect nothin' 'ud alter you, missie.'

'Well, Snowball 's perfectly splendid; she is a

greater "hero-yne" than I am, and you will know that some day, Tom.'

Tom made no answer, and by this time they had approached the front door. During their walk Patch had no time to think of the ordeal which lay before her. She had never been whipped in her life, and she had never been shut up in a dark room. She did not so much mind the dark room, for she considered that she had had very little sleep the night before—she would probably fall asleep wherever she was put—but the whipping was another matter, and, truth to tell, the thought of it cowed her for a minute. But then she thought of poor Snowball, who had been undergoing punishment for nearly twenty-four hours now, and who could only be delivered by her sharing that punishment; therefore her last remnant of fear vanished.

She herself rang the heavy bell which hung down by the side of the Scamp Family's hall-door. The hall-door was opened after a very long time by no less a person than Great-uncle Michael.

He was leaning on his gold-headed stick, and there was very little light in the hall, and the house beyond looked dark and mysterious and strangely still.

'Here I am, Snowball's Great-uncle Michael,' said Patch.—'Good-bye, Tom! good-bye! You can come for me at five in the morning. I will expect you to wait for me on the steps just here.'

Patch nodded to Tom, who felt for a wild minute that he must follow her into the hall, and Great-uncle Michael himself slammed the great door with a heavy bang almost in Tom's face. Patch looked straight up at Great-uncle Michael, and he looked intently down at her.

'Come this way,' he said, and, leaning on his gold-headed cane, he walked on in front down several passages and up some flights of stairs, until at last they found themselves in that very study where Patch and Snowball had behaved so riotously only a few days ago.

This room was lit by a large lamp, and was not quite so dark as the hall, and Great-uncle Michael motioned to Patch to stand on the hearth-rug.

'I did not think you would come,' he said. 'I had made up my mind that you were a coward, and did not mean a word you said to-day. Snowball has been in punishment for twenty-four hours now; she has been screaming a good deal, and behaving in the most wicked, outrageous manner. After seeing you I had an interview with her, and I told her that if you chose to share her punishment I would let her off in the morning.'

'And what did she say?' asked Patch a little breathlessly.

'She burst out crying, and said it was very wrong of me to expect you to do it, and that of

course you would not do it; and then she tried to get away, only I held her fast. She is terrified of the dark; she is not afraid of anything else. She is a dreadful, dreadful child.'

'If you were as small as she is, and if you had any one as terrible as you are to look after you, you might be a dreadful child,' said Patch.

'Eh!' said Great-uncle Michael. ''Pon my word, you have sauce!'

Patch made no answer.

'I suppose,' he continued, after a pause, 'Snowball did in a sort of way believe that you would come and share her punishment; but when night came and you never appeared she started that screaming fit, and I had to send Nora to quiet her. I was not going to see her again myself; not I.'

'And were you going to keep her always in the dark room if I had not come?' said Patch.

'That is my affair,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'But I will tell you this much,' he added; 'she would not have got out of it for some little time; and when she did get out of it, it would have been to undergo other punishments, and mighty unpleasant ones, too.'

'Well, I am here,' said Patch resolutely, taking off her hat and pushing back her hair. 'I couldn't come sooner because of the others knowing, 'cause of course they would have prevented me, and that

On that hand he inflicted ten very sharp cuts of the cane.

S. F. PAGE 109.

would never do. You had best begin, you know; but I want to tell you that to-morrow my father and mother are coming back, and my sister Muriel and my brother Jackdaw and I are going to tell them every single naughty thing which we have done during the past week, and all about to-night, and everything else. I have kept my word, and I am going to share Snowball's punishment. You may slap me on each of my hands as hard as ever you like, Snowball's Great-uncle Michael; and you may keep me locked up in the darkest of dark rooms until five o'clock to-morrow morning; but that is all you may do, for you would not like my father and mother to know that you had treated me worse than that.'

'And you're not frightened?' said Great-uncle Michael.

'No,' said Patch, setting her face. 'I love Snowball, and I am not frightened.'

Then Great-uncle Michael made a grunting sort of sound, and walked to a cupboard and took out a long, willowy-looking cane, and telling Patch that he meant what he said, and that he never yet had been known to go back from his word, he desired her to stretch out her right hand. On that hand he inflicted ten very sharp cuts of the cane, and he did the same on her left hand.

When this operation was over he put the cane back into the cupboard, and said to the little girl,

'I almost wish you had screamed, for it would have comforted Snowball to hear you. But now come along for the rest of your punishment. You are a brave child. I wish Snowball resembled you.'

He took her as he spoke down one long passage after another, and at last opened the door of a dark room.

'You go in there,' he said, pushing her before him.

Patch trembled on the threshold. She had scarcely time to find out whether the room was very dark or not, or very terrible or the reverse—she had scarcely time to think of anything, when suddenly she heard a stifled exclamation, and the next instant Snowball's arms were round her neck, and Snowball's round, wet face—wet from constant crying—was pressed to hers.

'Oh!' said Snowball, 'nothing, nothing matters now; we are together, and I am not a bit frightened.'

She hugged Patch very hard indeed, and Patch hugged her, and then the two desolate little girls sat down on the floor in the dismal room. But the floor was not very hard, for there was a carpet on it, and they were close together. So they managed to keep each other warm; and oh, how they whispered and whispered, and what wonderful things Patch said to Snowball and Snowball said to Patch!

'There is no one so noble as you!' said Snowball.

'I never had such a friend as you,' said Patch; and at last they kissed each other to sleep.

CHAPTER X.

WISE COUNSELS.

AT five o'clock in the morning, or indeed a little before that time, Great-uncle Michael himself stepped softly into the room where the little girls were lying on the sofa clasped tightly in each other's arms. He did not know why the sight of the two small faces gave him a curious contraction at his heart, or why he had an unexpected lump at his throat. He was not a man who was at all accustomed to giving way to emotion, and children, far from pleasing him, were, he considered, one of the worries of the world.

Patch, however, was not quite an ordinary child, and he could not regard her, therefore, in the ordinary manner.

'Little brick!' he muttered under his breath; 'not a cry out of her when I gave her that spanking. Now, if Snowball would take after her'—— He thought over this for a minute. Then he bent down, and, resuming his usual gruff manner, said abruptly, 'Wake, both of you!'

The two awakened as though somebody had shot them, and darted anxious glances into the face of Great-uncle Michael.

'You can go,' he said to Patch. 'There is a boy waiting for you on the steps of the front door. —As to you, Snowball, your punishment is over; you can go to your bedroom and get into your bed; but be sure you are down to breakfast.'

He turned away as he spoke, motioning to Patch to follow him. She did so; they parted on the hall-door steps.

'You will see me again perhaps to-day,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'Good-bye! I respect children like you.'

When Patch returned safely to the Messagers' house she went straight into Baby's room, and there she told her the whole story of the last few days—exactly what had occurred, and her part in it, and the part that Jackdaw would have played also in this little drama but for his unexpected illness.

'I suppose I was very naughty indeed,' said Patch when she came to the conclusion.

'I suppose you were,' replied Baby.

'But would you have done differently if the exact same things had happened to you, and your greatest friend was undergoing punishment and—starvation, and—and all sorts of dreadful things?' said Patch.

'I don't know,' replied Baby, with great thoughtfulness. 'Perhaps we had better consult mother; she will tell us what is right and what is wrong. You won't be afraid of our darling mother knowing the whole, whole truth, will you, Patch?'

'No,' said Patch; 'and I won't be afraid to ask her something either,' she continued, in a determined voice.

Baby did not ask what that something was, nor did Patch enlighten her.

Early on that same morning Mr and Mrs Messager returned, and they were not half-an-hour in the house before the three children took them aside and Baby began to tell the stories of their adventures.

'We were very, very naughty,' she began. 'We meant to be naughty'——

'Yes,' interrupted Patch; 'but we meant to 'fess, too, even before we began to be naughty. We made up our minds to be naughty and 'fess; wasn't that it, Jackdaw?'

Jackdaw nodded his very curly head.

'Well, let us listen; let us hear all about it,' said Mr Messager, while the mother put her arm round Patch and drew the child close to her side.

Then the whole story was told. It took a long time telling, and, truth to say, it astonished and pained Mr and Mrs Messager very much. But by slow degrees, in some marvellous way, as Patch herself took up the narrative and described Snowball and her loneliness and her naughtiness, and the want of love in the Scamp Family's home, and the want of true discipline and the want of everything that they themselves had, Mrs Messager felt her heart melting within her.

At last the whole story, down to the very last word, was told.

'There is nothing more to say,' remarked Patch, in conclusion. 'I was punished last night by Snowball's Grand-uncle Michael, and now I suppose I must be punished by you, father and mother; and I suppose you will punish Baby a little bit, and Jackdaw a little bit; but, of course, you will punish me biggest of all, 'cause mine was the biggest naughtiness. My hands did smart,' she continued, and she glanced for the first time at her little blistered palms. 'You won't whip me on my palms, will you, father?' she said, a pleading look coming into her face.

'No, Patch, I think not,' said Mr Messager. Then he turned to his wife. 'My dear,' he said, 'it seems to me very plain that Patch has had quite as much punishment as is good for her; in short, that she has done a very plucky thing—in a very naughty way, of course. But I can only say that I wish all people were as staunch to their friends as our little Patch.—As for you, Baby, your conscience has not been too comfortable, has it?—As to you, Jackdaw, I cannot punish you if I don't punish your sisters, so, perhaps, mother and I will consider the punishment—nil.'

There came such a smile over father's face that Patch flew to him and flung her arms round his neck, and said, 'Oh, if only Snowball had a father like you instead of a Great-uncle Michael!'

'Hey dey! hey!' cried a sudden voice. 'Who is taking my name in vain?' and, looking up, the entire family saw no less a person than Grand-uncle Michael and the entire Scamp Family entering the room.

Great-uncle Michael had his gold-headed cane, which he tapped on the ground as he walked. He now took off his hat in a very polite manner to Mrs Messager, and begged to introduce himself as Mr Darrell of the Moat House, and the four young people as his great-nephews and nieces—the little Darrells, 'But better known as the Scamps,' he concluded, 'for Scamps they are truly.'

Mrs Messager was very polite, and asked Mr Darrell to seat himself, which he, however, refused to do.

'Come here, Patch,' he said, and he held out his hand to that little girl. Patch hesitated for a minute, then she went up to his side.

'Did I hurt you very much last night?' he said. 'Yes, I see I did,' and he glanced at her poor little hands; 'but some vaseline will soon set that right. But there are other things to be set right, and I have come here for the purpose.—Madam,' he continued, turning to Mrs Messager, 'and you, sir, happen to be my next-door neighbours. Now, truth to tell, I always hate any one living in this place, and when I heard that children had arrived I was perfectly sick—yes, sick,' continued Great-uncle Michael; 'quite sick. 'But then,' he added,

'there are children and children, and this one is out of the ordinary run. Madam, I have come here to-day to throw myself on your mercy. I want my Scamps—Snowball, Nora, and the rest—to be turned into human beings, with hearts and consciences and senses of honour like your Patch. And I want boldly to ask you to help me, madam, for, to tell the truth, I don't know for the life of me how to set about it.'

'Of course we will both help you,' said Mr Messager. 'But you really must sit down, Mr Darrell; and may the children go with our children into the garden? After all, they don't know much of our garden, do they?'

'Yes, come—come at once,' whispered Patch to Snowball.

So the four Scamps and the three Messagers went out into the garden together, and there they talked long and solemnly and eagerly: Nora appealing to Baby, the two boys clustering round Jackdaw, and Snowball altogether devoting herself to Patch. Thus they continued for some time, until at last Mr Messager came out and said that Great-uncle Michael wished to see them all in the study. So into the study they returned. Great-uncle Michael was standing by the hearth. His hat was off and his gold-headed stick was in his hand. His long white hair looked whiter than usual, and his black eyes blacker; but there was quite a gentle expression round his mouth.

'Children,' he said, 'you Scamps and you Messagers, I have been talking things over with the wisest woman it has ever been my lot to see, and with the wisest man I have come across for many a long day, and I wish to tell you that I have at last understood the motive for Patch's conduct last night. Mrs Messager is kind enough to say that my Scamps may come and play with you three Messagers, and I invite you Messagers to come and play with my Scamps, and I think Mrs Messager will perhaps have a word or two of counsel to give you, Snowball and Nora and you two boys. Anyhow, I am satisfied that I have done a very wise thing when I made up my mind to encourage this friendship.'

'Oh, let us go over the garden wall at once!' said seven gay voices, raised in an ecstasy of delight. 'Let us find Tom and the ladder, and let us go right over the garden wall!'

CHAPTER XI.

A MOTHERLY PROPOSAL.

IT was delightful to be real friends at last! When the children climbed the ladder, held securely at the bottom by Tom, whose face looked very nearly as radiant as theirs, and when they seated themselves on the wall and managed to scramble down by a pear-tree, and when at last they found themselves safe and sound on the gravel-path on the other side of the wall, seven pairs of eyes met with a questioning gaze.

'It's all right at last,' said Babs; 'there is no sin about it any longer in any way.—Come, Nora; will you walk with me?'

She linked her hand inside Nora's arm, who immediately went down a long, shady path with her. There were now five children left to contemplate each other just by the garden wall. Patch was pale from all she had undergone during the previous night. She was, without doubt, the heroine of the hour. It was Patch who had brought about this great, this magnificent, this altogether unexpected crisis. She had saved Snowball; she had secured a friendship between the two families. She must be treated with honour.

'How many smacks did he give you on your hands?' asked Snowball, coming up close to Patch as she spoke.

'I don't know,' said Patch. 'A good many, I expect.'

'I know,' said Roger; 'and I'll tell you all how I do know. I was hiding in the cupboard in the room. You don't suppose that I am going to keep myself out of everything. My horrid tutor, Mr Lawson, gave me more lessons to get through than I could possibly manage, so I just didn't do any; and this morning, somehow or other, Dandy and I gave him such a piece of our minds that he went right away, and is going to "communicate" —that was his word—with Great-uncle Michael. But we don't care; we don't care. We have won a great victory, and we are going to have a jolly—right jolly good time.'

'But about the slaps,' said Snowball. 'How many on each hand? Did you count, Roger?'

'Yes,' said Roger, 'I did. I was poking the tiniest bit of my nose outside the cupboard door, and just the corner of one eye; and I saw—oh goody, didn't I see! There was her majesty Patch, standing up like a brick and as straight as a soldier; and there was the cane whizzing in the air and coming down—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—ten times, first on one hand and then on t'other, and—would you believe it?—not a squeak from her little majesty; she didn't

even flinch.—You 're a rare plucky un, you are, Patch, and I respect you.'

'So do I,' said Dandy.

'Well, that is all right,' said Snowball at this juncture; 'but remember, please, that Patch is *my* friend. It was me she came to save. You go off with your Jackdaw and play with him. I 'm thinking that boys is poor sort of things; it 's girls that do the big things when it comes to the scratch.'

'None of that!' said Roger, flying up to the little, round, podgy girl and threatening immediately to knock her down. 'None of your sauce, young un!'

'And none of yours!' said Patch suddenly. 'If I am a queen, and brave, and all that sort of thing —which I 'm not, and never could be, for I am just an or'nary sort of little girl—I am not going to have fighting. We has had enough of being naughty; we 're going to be real good in future.'

Roger looked dubious, Dandy sniffed, and Snowball, taking her opportunity, dragged Patch away from the others. She was very much excited. She felt a world of love for Patch surging up into her heart. That queer little heart of Snowball's had been really wakened for the first time by Patch. There was something noble about Patch which roused her enthusiasm. She wanted Patch to be her friend. Patch had already a great influence on her.

'Aren't the boys horrid?' said Snowball. 'Aren't

I right when I say as they're poor things by the side of girls? Oh Patch, I do want to have you all alone! I have such a lot to say.'

'And so have I,' said Patch, and as she spoke she turned restlessly and faced Snowball.

Patch had a queer little face, pretty in one sense, but more remarkable for its wistful and almost pathetic expression than for anything else. She had not Snowball's fiery black eyes or thick hair, like a black mop, but she looked quite dignified now as she faced her little companion.

'I want us,' she said, 'sort of—to keep our promise, you know.'

'Whatever's that?' said Snowball.

'Why, don't you understand, Snowball? Don't you understand that as my father and mother and your Great-uncle Michael has let us be friends, we are 'spected to help each other somehow—not to allow fights, or anything of that sort, but just be—sort o' real good? Oh, I don't mean "goody,"' cried Patch. 'I hate that like anything; but somehow to be—sort of—growing better every day, sort o' preparing for the big, big fight that we'll have by-and-by.'

'Gracious goodness!' cried Snowball, 'whatever does you mean by that?'

'Oh Snowball, when we're big by-and-by, we'll have sort of—to fight the world, and to get the better of it—that is, if we are to live as we ought to live. I know and I can't explain.'

'You know a lot,' said Snowball; 'but my head sort of aches to-day, and I don't want any more lessons, please. Let's come into the house; I won't do one real naughty thing, but I'll show you the different pipes in Great-uncle Michael's study, and his jar of tobacco, and his row of guns, and the stuffed birds that he killed his own self, and the skin of the tiger and the lion that he slaughtered when he was young. When I was very, very small I used to be frightened of that lion; I used to think that he'd come alive, his eyes were so bright. But I am not frightened no more; I'm not frightened of anything now that I have got you for my very own friend, Patch darling.'

Patch followed her little companion into the house, and they spent an hour or two quite happily examining all sorts of curiosities which seemed to abound all over the Moat House. They were in the midst of this occupation, when the tap of Great-uncle Michael's gold-headed stick was heard in the passage, and that gentleman came in. He glared fiercely from under his shaggy eyebrows when he saw one little girl standing on a step-ladder, and another underneath reaching up for some very valuable old china which was being handed down for her to examine.

'Now, whatever is the meaning of this, you scamps?' began the irascible old gentleman, quite forgetting for the moment in his irritation the compact he had made with Mr and Mrs Messager.

'Whatever are you doing?—Snowball, put back that china this minute!—And you'—— Then he stopped short. 'Why, you are Patch! Merciful goodness! I don't seem to know what's happening to-day. Are you a good child, or are you a bad? I thought you were a very fine sort of child when you stood up to your punishment last night. But now—if you come poking and prying while'——

'I didn't poke nor pry,' said Patch. 'I came in 'cause Snowball wanted me to. But I'll never do it again if you don't wish me, Snowball's Great-uncle Michael. I don't want to displease you—indeed—indeed.'

'I believe you, child.—Snowball, do you hear? She won't do it again.'

'She'll be naughty, of course,' said Snowball, 'whether she does this or other things. Children like us can't help being naughty. Naughtiness is growed in us like a weed.'

'There'll be means taken to get that weed out,' said Great-uncle Michael, turning a ferocious face upon the little girl. 'But there, there! 'Pon my word, I don't want to be cross to-day.—Come in, Messager, won't you, and let me introduce you and your good wife to my sanctum sanctorum?'

'What a wonderful old room!' said Mr Messager, entering at that moment, accompanied by Patch's mother.

He took off his hat as he spoke, and gazed round him at a perfect specimen of a Queen Anne room

lined with oak from floor to ceiling, and, for that matter, with a marvellous carved oak ceiling.

'But I don't particularly want to look at the room just at present, if you will forgive me, Mr Darrell,' said Mrs Messager. 'I want these two dear little children to take me over the grounds, and to show me all over your pretty place. My dear husband would, I know, like to have a chat with you, but I should like best at the present moment to have a talk with the children.'

'And so you shall, madam, with the utmost pleasure,' said Great-uncle Michael, who never, as he said to himself, could get on with women, and was much relieved at the lady's suggestion.—'You and I will have a pipe together, if you have no objection,' he said to Mr Messager, 'and'——

'Mother, mother, you *must* see the garden,' said Patch, running up to her mother; 'and Snowball must show it to you.'

'Take my other hand, Snowball,' said Mrs Messager; and then the three went out into the grounds.

Certainly it was an extraordinary day—quite perfect in itself, with the merest fleck of a cloud floating in the azure of the heavens, and with the tiniest zephyr of a breeze laden with a perfume of roses fanning the cheeks of the three as they walked down the grassy sward which led towards the bottom of the garden. But, after all, it was not the day itself that roused such a queer enthu-

siasm in Snowball's little untutored heart. It was the feel of the soft, very soft hand of the lady who was now holding her little hand.

Snowball had never known her mother. The children's mother had died when Snowball was a week old, and none of them—not even Nora, who was twelve—could remember her at all well. Nora used to dream about her dead mother, however, but Snowball never dreamt of her at all. Snowball, in her heart of hearts, had never given a thought to what a mother could be like until this moment; and even at this very moment she scarcely knew what she felt or why there was a lump in her throat, or why tears were perilously near her black eyes, or why she suddenly became quite soothed and peaceful, and not a bit inclined to let go that soft, that very soft hand.

Mrs Messager walked down into the garden in the most matter-of-fact way, talking just on ordinary subjects, and addressing herself more to her own little daughter than she did to Snowball.

By-and-by they reached the sort of wilderness at the bottom of the garden where the celebrated tea-party had met not many days ago, and, lying on the grass, in a pretty, graceful attitude, was fair-haired Nora, while the two boys, Roger and Dandy, were vigorously swinging Jackdaw about a hundred feet away.

'I want to see everything,' said Mrs Messager then.

'Oh mother, mother!' said Muriel, springing to her feet when she saw Mrs Messager, 'have you come too over the garden wall?'

'No, darling,' was the answer. 'I came round by the front entrance, through the iron gates and up the long avenue to the house.'

'Same as I did last night,' whispered Patch to herself. There were spots of excited colour in her cheeks. Never had she lived through such a wonderful day.

'And has father come too?' asked Muriel.

'Yes,' said Mrs Messager; 'he is with Mr Darrell in the study.—Now, children, I want you all to collect round me, every single one of you. I have something I want to say, and it has quite as much to do with my children as with you four.—Nora, will you, dear, call your two brothers and Jackdaw?'

Nora sped away as fast as her long legs would let her, and presently the three boys came hurrying back; Jackdaw hopping and jumping in his excitement, Roger and Dandy following more meekly, for the fact is they were not accustomed to the sort of lady Mrs Messager was.

'Sit down, won't you all?' said Mrs Messager. 'It is such a lovely day, and there are all sorts of pleasant, comfortable-looking patches of grass about here.'

'But you mustn't sit on the grass, mother,' said Jackdaw. 'You get into this swing, mother.'

'Oh no, no; that won't do,' said Nora. 'We'll

fetch a chair for Mrs Messager from the house. Who 'll run the fastest, Jackdaw, Snowball, or Dandy? Whoever gets first to the house shall have the honour of bringing down Mrs Messager's chair.'

Nora spoke in a curious way, with a sort of slight affectation and even disdain in her words. Her heart had by no means yet been touched, although she was interested in this strange new order of things, and was quite ready to listen to Mrs Messager. Mrs Messager glanced curiously at the tall and pretty girl.

'You sing a good deal, don't you?' she said.

'I am always singing nonsense songs,' answered Nora in her careless tone.—'Children! who 'll be off first to the house?'

There was a shout, and away the three went. Alack and alas! even now things did not go quite smoothly, for Snowball fell and cut her lip, and Dandy got first to the house and brought the chair back, and Snowball reappeared crying bitterly and holding her pinafore to her wounded lip.

'I hate—hate—*hate*'—— she began.

'You don't hate me, Snowball,' said Mrs Messager at once.—'Oh, what a comfortable chair! Thank you very much indeed, Dandy. Just put it here in the shade, won't you?—Now, Snowball, come and sit on my knee for a minute. Oh, that poor little lip! But I will soon put it right.—Can any one get me a little water to wipe the stains away?'

Snowball stopped crying on the spot. Jackdaw went and fetched some water from a well which was quite handy, and Snowball was restored to perfect peace and good-humour. She nestled luxuriously in Mrs Messager's arms, and began to feel more than ever the mysterious charm of a mother. The rest of the children seated themselves anyhow on the ground, and Mrs Messager's gentle voice began to speak.

'Now,' she said, 'I have a proposal to make to you all, and I make it to you first, before I say a single word to your great-uncle, Mr Darrell.'

'He is not my great-uncle,' said Patch.

'Hush, Patch darling! I was thinking specially now of the Darrells, but I mentioned you all collectively because it does apply to you all.'

'Please go on,' said Nora. Then she added, 'Is it something we Darrells—we, the Scamp Family—have to decide?'

'It is, most certainly. It is something that you and my children have to decide between you. Your decision won't make the thing come to pass; but if you disapprove, I shall not mention it to Mr Darrell.'

'Thanks very much,' said Nora. 'Please tell us what it is,' she added, pushing back her golden hair, and looking full up with her blue eyes into the lady's face.

'Well, you see,' said Mrs Messager, 'I have really

in my heart of hearts wanted to know you for a long time.'

'But why?' said Nora, looking sceptical.

'For one reason, Nora, because I have heard you singing—singing in all parts of this most wonderful garden; and I have liked the tone of your voice. Then, for another reason, because I knew there were four children here, and that those children had no mother.'

Snowball nestled more luxuriously into Mrs Messager's kind arms, and laid her black head with greater confidence against that lady's shoulder.

'Like you,' she said in a confidential tone, turning and looking full into the sweet face.

'Do stop chattering, Snowball!' said Nora. 'There is something important going to be said, and you keep on with your silly remarks.'

'You had best not'—— burst from Snowball. 'You know me—I hate '——

'Hush, dear!' said Mrs Messager. 'Those are ugly words.'

'Not as ugly as *she* is!' said Snowball. 'Horrid thing! White face outside—black heart inside—hate her!—sneaky old thing—that I do!'

'Come, come, children, this is very like quarrelling,' said Mrs Messager. 'Now, suppose nobody speaks until I have told my little plan.'

'Oh, if it's a plan, it's going to be something 'licious!' said Patch, standing behind Snowball, and putting her hand on the latter's shoulder.'

'I think,' said Mrs Messager—'and I have consulted my husband on the matter—that you two girls—Snowball and you, Nora—might, when the holidays are over, come back to town with us, and have lessons with Miss Peters, and might have as friends Muriel and Alice'——

'Who's Alice?' asked Snowball.

'Me,' said Patch. 'I'm really Alice, although I am not Alice in Wonderland.'

'Call you nothing but Patch,' said Snowball.

'Hush, dear; hush!' said Mrs Messager. 'We thought,' she continued, 'that you four little girls might have a good time together, and might make friends with each other—real friends, I mean—the sort of friends who last all through life; and my husband and I are prepared to propose this thing to Mr Darrell, provided that you, Nora, and you, Snowball, wish for it.'

'I wishes for it; so you can go and settle it up this instant minute,' said Snowball.

'But what does Nora say?'

Nora sat very still. She was accustomed to Snowball and her wild ways. She was not going to consider her at all in the matter. She was bewildered. The Moat House was all very well, but in the autumn and winter it was dull, and Miss Spicer was a dreadfully stupid governess, and lessons were horrible things. Nora was not won over at all by Mrs Messager herself, but she had a

girl's natural desire for adventure and for seeing the world.

'Snowball is silly,' she said after a pause, 'and one mustn't consider what a small girl of that sort wishes.'

'Mustn't one indeed?' said Snowball. 'Small girl yourself. Black heart—fair face—that's not me.'

'Snowball, I shall be really angry, dear—I mean sorry—if you interrupt again,' said Mrs Messager.

Snowball wriggled round, and hid her hot face on the good lady's shoulder.

'Go on,' she said. 'It's bursting inside o' me; but I'll keep it in, if you'll be quick; and I needn't look at *her*.'

No one asked Snowball what was bursting inside her wild little heart, and Nora, after a minute's pause, continued: 'I want to think of what you say from my point of view. I have never seen London, and I should like very much to see it. I suppose you would take us everywhere—to the Zoo, and the Tower, and London Bridge, and Kew Gardens, and to Windsor and to Buckingham Palace, and—and somewhere every day.'

'I could not quite take you somewhere every day, but I would show you as much of London as possible,' said Mrs Messager.

'You wouldn't be always, I suppose,' said Nora, 'telling us that we were to be good? For, you see, we haven't been brought up that way.'

'I could almost promise,' said Mrs Messager, 'that I would not talk of it at all.'

'Oh!' said Nora, opening her eyes very wide.

'You would see from my face and manner what I wished; but I would not bother you with words, for I don't think words have much effect,' said Mrs Messager.

'And should we have many lessons?' said Nora.

'Well,' said Mrs Messager, 'that, I think, would be your special pleasure. You are very fond of music, aren't you?'

'I!' said Nora. 'I have never heard any except in church—and we don't go there very often—and the songs of the birds. I can,' she added quickly, 'make up songs just like all the birds. Are there heaps and heaps of singing birds in London?'

'The singing birds are for the country; there are only a few poor caged things in London,' said Mrs Messager. 'But I would take you to hear music—real, wonderful, great music; for I can guess that you love it, and I would have you taught to make music yourself.'

'Then that settles it,' said Nora comfortably. 'I'll go.'

'But what's to become of us?' said Roger. 'It isn't,' he added quickly, 'that we'd miss the girls one little bit. Dandy and I would a thousand times rather do without them—Snowball's such a spitfire, and Nora thinks such a precious lot of

herself. But still, we want our fun too. Are you going to ask us to come with you?'

'In one way I am, and in another way I am not. Jackdaw attends a very nice school, and goes there as a weekly boarder. Perhaps your uncle Michael will allow you to go also as weekly boarders; then you would come to me, and would see your sisters every Saturday night and return to school early on Monday morning.'

'Wouldn't care a bit about seeing them,' said Dandy; 'but it 'ud be rather nice to have a good look round at the Zoo or some such place, or go to a circus—I hear there are wonderful circuses in London—that is, if you would take us, madam.'

'Well, I will promise to do what I can to make you happy,' said Mrs Messager. 'And now, children, if you are really agreeable to this plan, I will go immediately and talk to Mr Darrell. I presume you, Muriel, and you, Patch, and you, Jackdaw, are willing to have the society of your young friends up till Christmas?'

'Must us go back here then?' said Snowball's voice from its refuge on Mrs Messager's shoulder.

'That depends,' was the kind reply; and Snowball buried her head once more, determining with all her might and main to keep *it* caged inside her little breast, however hard it fought to get out.

'There is one thing,' said Muriel. 'We, of course, will be delighted with mother's plan; for mother has never made a plan yet that wasn't the best;

and we 'll agree—won't we, Patch?—to have Nora and Snowball with us; and I am sure Jackdaw won't mind a bit having Dandy and Roger with him at school. But I think,' continued Muriel, 'we ought to make a condition.'

'A condition?' said Nora.

'Yes; it is this. Do you know, Nora, that what mother is doing she is doing out of the most beautiful, absolute kindness? Now, for my part, I don't mind if—if you do say things to vex me now and then, Nora; and I am sure Patch will be awfully fond of Snowball; but what I am determined about is: that you will promise faithfully—you two girls—that you won't make things hard for mother, that you will think of her and how sweet she is, and that you won't be naughty—that is, more naughty than you can help, just because you wouldn't like to vex her.'

Snowball got down solemnly at these words from her refuge on Mrs Messager's knee, and taking the soft hand of the lady, raised it to her baby-lips and kissed it.

'You are sort of comforting,' said Snowball. 'I wouldn't hurt you, not for the world.'

Then she seized Patch's hand and dashed away with her friend into the shelter of the nearest shrubbery. There she burst into frantic tears, clutching hold of Patch all the time, and clinging to her as though she could not let her go.

'Oh, she is lovely! she is lovely!' said Snowball.

'But that horrid thing inside of me will flare up, and make such a growling noise, and try so hard to get out! Why was I made like that? Is you made like that, Patch?'

'Yes,' said Patch; ''spect so. But, you see, it's this way. My horrid thing inside of me has been somehow kept in order, so that I know how to manage it—that is, most times; and it's mother who has done it, and father who has done it. Oh, she'll manage things for you too, Snowball; for I can see that she loves you.'

'It's awful nice!' said Snowball. 'It's sort of soothing, that it is. Let's walk up and down, Patch. I do hope Great-uncle Michael won't mind.'

CHAPTER XII.

MONEY NO OBSTACLE.

GREAT-UNCLE MICHAEL did not mind in the very least. It was all put before him in simple, straightforward language by Mrs Messager. She was the sort of woman who always tried to help others. She was greatly impressed by the neglected state of the four children who lived on the other side of the garden wall. Her warm heart was filled with sympathy for them, and she earnestly wished to help them. To wish to do a thing and to do it meant practically the same thing with Mr and Mrs Messager.

They had a very large house in town, and there would be plenty of room for the two little girls, and Miss Peters could teach four little girls just as easily as she now taught two; and, in addition, Nora and Muriel should have special masters to give them special instruction, whereas Snowball and Patch would find plenty to learn from Miss Peters herself.

Great-uncle Michael stared very much when Mrs Messager, in her gentle, modest tones, made the astounding proposition that she and her husband were willing to take the Scamps off his hands.

'My good gracious, madam!' he said. 'Gracious

me! you don't know what you are talking about. Those children—why, they are the torment of my life; and whatever will you do with them in a place like London? Even in the country they break all bounds. I don't believe any single one of them has a scrap of conscience or common-sense. They flout their tutor—a very good sort of fellow is Lawson—and they disobey their governess—I can't say much for Miss Spicer—she 's a daily: I couldn't stand a woman living in the house, madam—and those two girls never learn anything from her at all. It 's my belief she is terrified of them. 'Pon my word, I can scarcely believe my ears. 'Tisn't right of me to take advantage of your most generous offer.'

'It isn't really generous. I shall, of course, expect you to pay all the expenses,' said Mrs Messager in her calm voice. 'And now I want to say something more. It is my opinion, Mr Darrell, that you have got four rather remarkable young people under your roof. Snowball is decidedly out of the common. I believe her to be a child in a thousand; and I am convinced that a little care, a little love, will do wonders for her. It probably was not to be expected from an old gentleman like yourself, Mr Darrell; but the child has hitherto had neither care nor love. Let me try what I can do for her for three months. Nora will be more difficult, it is true.'

'Nora!' said the old gentleman. 'Why, she 's

the best of the bunch. She is fairly respectable in her behaviour, and often complains to me about the way the others won't listen to her.'

'Nevertheless, I repeat, Nora will be the more difficult to manage,' said Mrs Messager; 'but I don't despair of her. She is exceedingly pretty, and, I believe, clever. Let me try her. I am willing—oh, so willing!—to help you and the little girls.'

'And what about the boys? What about the young jackanapes?' cried Great-uncle Michael.

'In any case,' said Mr Messager, now taking his part in the discussion, 'those two boys ought to go to school. They are young, it is true, but they must mix with other boys—that is, if they are to have any chance at all in life. Our little son Dick goes to a first-rate preparatory school in the neighbourhood of London. Your little fellows could join him, and come to us, for the first term, every Saturday to Monday. I do not know myself whether weekly boarders get as much benefit from the school as boys who are there altogether. But that matter can easily be changed, and they can stay at school altogether if it turns out to be best for them later on. For a time, at least, we would adopt the plan for them that we have used with much benefit for Dick.'

'Well, I am sure—I am sure,' said Mr Darrell, 'I don't know what to say. I am enormously obliged; it would be an immense relief to me.

The fact is, these poor children were left orphans some years ago. They were the children of my nephew, who was killed in a railway accident. Their mother had died immediately after the birth of little Victoria, the youngest. I knew nothing about children; and, to be frank, I hated the idea of looking after them. I have no near relations, and had no one, therefore, to consult. I thought the young scamps would do best under my own roof, and I did what seemed absolutely necessary. They certainly have contrived to give me a vast lot of misery, and in many ways I consider their conduct reprehensible. Snowball, or Victoria, surprised me, however, by the way she took her punishment the other day, and of course I respect your little girl's conduct enormously. Yes, yes, my dear sir, and my dear madam, I will accept your generous offer with an old man's most grateful thanks. Money is no object, Mrs Messager, for I am rich. Get the children what they require, and send me the bills to pay. I shall in all probability shut up the Moat House for the winter and go abroad. I loathe English winters, and want to get into the sunshine somewhere. I am very much obliged, and I say yes.'

'Then the matter is settled,' said Mr Messager. 'We leave here in about a fortnight and return to London. During that time I trust our children and yours will become great friends. And now, we won't detain you any longer, Mr Darrell.'

It was in this simple and unexpected way that everything was suddenly changed for the Scamp Family. After the first rush of surprise was over, the four Scamps decided that nothing would be nicer than leaving the dingy old house, that London must be a fascinating place, that Mrs Messager was not at all likely to be cross or unpleasant, that Mr Messager—— But he seemed scarcely to count, not just at first, at any rate, for they really did not know him at all.

The boys were in ecstasies at the thought of leaving 'stupid old Lawson,' as they disrespectfully called him, and were never tired of asking Jackdaw what was done at his school. Jackdaw felt important on the subject. It was delightful to tell other boys of school-life and school games and school companions.

Meanwhile, Nora suddenly evinced a desire to get pretty dresses. It dawned upon her one morning, about a week before her visit to London began, that her wardrobe needed complete overhauling. Snowball was quite too young to give her clothes a thought; but Nora was tall and slim and pretty, and did not wish to be dressed one whit worse than Muriel. She looked disdainfully at her pink cotton frocks, most of which she had outgrown, and went boldly on a certain morning into Great-uncle Michael's room just when he was at his breakfast.

'Ha, miss!' he said, glancing up at her, and

then continuing his perusal of a letter which had arrived by that morning's post. 'What are you up to, miss? What do you want now?'

'We are going to London in a week, Uncle Michael, aren't we?' said Nora.

'Yes. Good gracious! am I likely to forget it? In a week peace will reign in this house. There'll be no more jabbering and squalling and quarrelling. There'll be no more breakages. There'll be no more fights. The Moat House will be a paradise in a week's time. I'm not likely to forget it.'

'Thanks so much, Uncle Michael,' said Nora. 'I am glad you feel so happy on the subject. But, please, will you give me some money now?'

'Money, miss! What for?'

'To buy proper clothes,' said Nora; and she came and stood where the sunshine fell on her faded pink dress, and held it out for inspection.

'See,' she said. 'I am a Darrell; I am of your blood, Uncle Michael, and I suppose you don't want me to go to London to be laughed at. I can't go in this frock, and none of my other frocks are a bit better, so I want heaps of new ones. Please give me a great deal of money, Uncle Michael, and let me get the new frocks immediately.'

'Ho, ho! So we are turning our attention to fine clothes,' said Uncle Michael, 'are we? Well, I don't mind your having a pretty frock.

You can get another cotton dress in the village, and old Berrell the housekeeper can make it up.'

'But I want half-a-dozen pretty dresses,' said Nora, 'and old Berrell can't make one of them up. Please give me money, lots of money, Uncle Michael. I want things, and Snowball wants things, and the boys want things; but the others can fight their own battles; I've come for myself. I've put up with this sort of thing long enough. I am twelve years old, and I am tall, and I must have proper clothes; so here I sit until you give me what I want, Uncle Michael.'

'Sit as long as you like, miss; I don't care,' said the wayward old gentleman.

Nora seated herself very calmly. She crossed her legs, by so doing showing off the disadvantages of the worn-out pink frock to perfection. She folded her arms and leaned back in her chair, thus displaying how much too short her sleeves were, laying her pretty, fair head against the dark back of the chair. She watched Uncle Michael with extreme calmness as he ate his breakfast. The old man hated being watched. He was as susceptible to another pair of eyes being fixed on him as though some one were boring a hole through his head. Not for worlds would he let this naughty, troublesome child see, however, that she annoyed him. He went on crunching his toast and sipping his hot coffee, and pretending to read those letters

which had interested him so much before Nora had broken in upon his quiet.

Nora continued to watch in her aggravating way, and presently she turned the screw a little tighter. She began to sing, at first softly to herself, then louder. Nora's selection of songs was by no means of the sort likely to please an irascible old gentleman.

'Georgie Porgy,' she began.

'Stop that!' said Uncle Michael.

Nora did stop, but the next minute an exquisitely sweet voice rose again:

'Gin a body meet a body,
Comin' thro' the rye.'

Uncle Michael turned and faced her. 'I hate singing, and you know it.'

'I hate waiting,' said Nora; 'and I think, perhaps, Uncle Michael, you know that.'

She remained pensive and silent for a little, but once again broke into an irresistible carol:

'Three blind mice!
See how they run.'

'Oh, good gracious, child!' cried Uncle Michael, springing to his feet, 'you drive me mad. Am I an infant in a cradle that you should come in here and insult me with these songs? There! How much money do you want?'

'Twenty pounds, please,' said Nora, trembling

with excitement, and wondering if a book would be thrown at her head.

Nothing of the sort. To Uncle Michael it was all one whether a pink cotton frock cost ten shillings or twenty pounds. He went to his bureau, fetched out four five-pound notes, and flung them into Nora's lap.

'Oh goody!' said Nora. 'Goody!'

She clasped the money in an ecstasy of joy, and dashed out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

SHOPPING.

HAVING obtained her money, Nora was determined to spend it as she pleased. It had been given to her without any proviso. She was not told, for instance, to hand it over to Mrs Messager. She had been simply given twenty pounds. Oh, what a large, what an enormous sum! She felt grown-up.

She marched out into the sunshine with her head in the air. The Scamp children were close by, but the Messager children had not yet arrived. It had been arranged on the previous night that the Messagers and the Darrells were to meet at the home of the former on this special morning.

The moment Snowball saw Nora she dashed up to the latter in her impetuous way.

'Are you coming? Are you ready? We are all waiting. We're going over the garden wall. We didn't mean to wait for you another minute. My, how cocky you look, with your head up in the air!'

'I feel—not cocky, but distinguished,' said Nora. 'I feel grown-up; I am a person of property. You had best, all of you young uns, respect me.'

'What's a person of property?' asked Snowball.

'What I am,' said Nora.

Snowball stood in front of her. She squared her already square shoulders, and planted her stout legs firmly on the ground, and hung her arms to her sides.

'Person of property!' she began. 'I don't know what you mean by the word, but come 'long, anyway. Come over the garden wall and see the others.'

'I can't,' said Nora. 'Now, you children, see here.' Her heart was swelling so triumphantly in her breast that she could not possibly keep her secret to herself a minute longer. 'You'll soon know, you three, what property means,' she said. 'Property means something of value, something of one's own, something that makes one very, very important.'

'Sort of—nose turned up in the air,' said Snowball, 'and eyes squinting 'cos they can't keep straight from 'citement. That's what you look like. But come, where is the property?'

'Yes,' said Roger, 'where is the property? Do be quick and tell us, you tiresome girl!'

'See here,' said Nora slowly.

She unfolded the precious crisp bank-notes, and raising her right hand so as to keep the beloved money out of the reach of the others, she desired them to look.

'Only stupid paper!' said Snowball.

Dandy also was not greatly excited over the five-pound notes, but Roger knew their value.

'Why, that's money,' he said—'lots of money! How did you come by it?'

Nora nodded towards the house.

'Great-uncle Michael,' she said. 'He gave it to me 'cause I worried him by staring as hard as ever I could, and singing the songs he most detested. He gave it to me to get rid of me. This means twenty pounds. Twenty times twenty shillings. Oh, I can't be bothered doing the sum; but it's oceans and oceans of money. Money means power. I am not going over the garden wall this morning. I mean to spend some of my money.'

'I wonder,' said Snowball very softly, 'was it staring hard as did it?'

'Don't *you* try it on,' said Nora. 'You'll get far more than you bargained for.'

'I'll talk to Patch,' said Snowball. 'I'm not a bit frightened,' she continued.

As she spoke she went in the direction of the wall. The boys followed her.

'Aren't you really coming, Nora?' they said.

'No,' said Nora in a lofty tone; 'I have other things to attend to. I may come presently; I can't say. Make no promises for me; I am busy.'

The boys left her.

'She isn't a pleasant person of property, is she?' said Dandy to Roger.

Roger nodded and then said, 'Don't let's bother about her.'

Meanwhile, Nora marched off in the direction of the stables. There were fine stables belonging to the Moat House, great big empty horse-boxes, large carriage-houses, everything for the accommodation of horses that a man of wealth could desire. But Uncle Michael had no wish for carriage-horses or horse exercise of any kind. It is true he kept an old pony and a pony-chair, which he did not often use. The pony inhabited one of the horse-boxes, and had a lazy time of it.

Nora, however, had made up her mind that he was not to be lazy that morning. She entered the yard, and presently finding a boy, desired him to harness the pony to the pony-chair which on rare occasions Great-uncle Michael used.

'Pat,' said Nora, 'I want the chair and the pony as fast as possible. I want to drive in to Merton.'

Pat stared.

'Miss Nora, I daren't!' he said. 'The master 'ud be wild. He'd send me about my business, miss. I daren't do it.'

'You needn't come with me, you stupid boy,' said Nora; 'and if you're frightened I can easily manage it for myself. Only, if you will help me to harness the pony I'll give you a shilling by-and-by, when I come back. Look here,' continued Nora; 'I'm rich—very rich indeed.'

She showed a corner of one of the precious five-

pound notes to Pat, who knew far more about money than did Nora's own brothers and sisters.

'Lawk-a-mercy, miss!' he said, and then he went obediently and brought out the pony and harnessed him to the old chair.

'I will come with you if you like, miss. Sam is very lazy, and he'll go twice as fast with me.'

'If you will do that really and truly, Pat,' said Nora, 'you shall have two shillings. Uncle Michael is busy this morning, and won't ever miss us till we are back again.'

'Very well, miss,' said Pat obediently, and they started off.

It took them a whole hour to get to Merton, which was, in reality, a very unimportant little place, and not more than three miles away. But Sam was lazy, and nothing would induce him to go fast. Nora had occasionally, in Miss Spicer's company, walked to Merton.

There was a certain shop in the little High Street where clothes of all sorts could be obtained. When the children's wardrobes had got almost past repair, Miss Spicer used to venture with her young charges to this shop, where she secured the cheapest materials, which were then made up by Berrell, the housekeeper, at home.

Nora used to love these expeditions, although Snowball and the boys hated them. Nora remembered the name of the shop quite well. It was Jellicoe's. It was a draper's shop, and had, in

the opinion of the ignorant little girl, a most striking appearance.

When the pony-chair and its two occupants reached the outskirts of the small town, Nora desired Pat to draw up the pony at Jellicoe's.

'I have business in here,' she said. 'You will have to wait for me for some little time.'

Pat, who was lost in astonishment at Nora's daring, and was altogether overcome with wonder as to how and in what possible way a member of the Scamp Family could have secured so valuable a thing as a five-pound note, obeyed without a word. Nora marched into the shop with her head in the air; but when she got inside, it suddenly swept over her that she was only a little, unimportant, shabbily dressed girl. Her pink cotton frock, her torn sailor hat, her gloveless hands, and her shabby boots looked altogether out of keeping in this shop, where the fashionable ladies of Merton did their business.

It was, in reality, an exceedingly poor shop, and the fashionable ladies were not fashionable at all. But Nora had no standard to judge them by, and to her they looked enormously grand and important. Her eyes assumed a wild and frightened appearance. She looked dizzily around her, and almost wished she had not started on this expedition.

Presently a shop-walker came up to her and asked her what she required.

'Clothes, please,' said Nora.

This was so evident that the man nearly laughed.

'I've got money—heaps of money, and I want to buy things,' she said, looking at him appealingly. 'I am Miss Darrell, from the Moat House. Will you take me to the right counter? I have been here before, but not for a long time.'

Now, Miss Darrell from the Moat House, however insignificant her appearance, was a person very much above all the rest of the customers who were now present. The shop-walker bowed to the young lady, and with the utmost deference took her to the counter where bales of all sorts of goods were being displayed. A smiling shop-girl bent forward to know what the young lady required.

'It's Miss Darrell from the Moat House,' whispered the man to the young attendant. 'Do the best you can for her.'

The girl immediately put on a bewitching smile. What did madam require? All her services were at madam's disposal.

Nora felt inclined to laugh at being called 'madam,' but she was also reassured and began her business with all the intelligence she possessed.

'I want a new frock,' she said, 'something very pretty.'

'The material for a new frock, you mean, miss? We only sell materials here.'

'Well, I suppose so,' said Nora.

'What did madam require?'

'You can have one ready-made if I take you to another department.'

'Oh, can I?' said Nora, in high delight. 'One that I can put on at once?'

'Certainly, miss; if it happens to fit you, you might wear it at once; it can be easily managed.'

'That is just what I should like to do,' said Nora. 'Thank you very much indeed. I will go to that part of the shop you spoke of, if you will show me the way.'

'With pleasure, Miss Darrell. Will you follow me, please?'

After all, these people were very nice. Nora's head went up a little higher in the air. The frightened look left her eyes, and the flush of gratified vanity deepened the colour in her cheeks. She looked very remarkable and very lovely, somewhat like a little briar-rose—out of place, truly, in these uncongenial surroundings, but none the less beautiful on that account. More than one person turned to stare at the pretty, wild face and the masses of golden hair as the child followed the shop-attendant up some stairs and into the costume department.

'Who is she?' they asked one of another, and the fact that she was one of those queer, wild little Darrells, whom everybody knew about but every one pitied, only heightened the admiration which her beauty excited.

There was a very nice shop-attendant upstairs. In fact, all Nora's ways seemed to be strewn with rose-leaves on this special morning. Ravishing costumes were brought out for her inspection. She had not the least idea how to dress herself, but had an eye to bright colours. She turned to them as naturally as a flower will turn to the sunshine. Pale grays, reposeful drabs, were indignantly put aside. She selected a very deep cerulean blue costume trimmed with a vast amount of white lace.

'I will try that on, please,' she said.

The dress was of somewhat heavy material, and when Nora found herself attired in it she was very hot, and her poor little body sighed for the comfort of her washing pink cotton.

'You look really elegant in that dress, miss,' said the attendant.

'I will take it,' said Nora. 'I will keep it on. How much is it?'

The dress, which was made of the most garish material, was to be bought for twenty-five shillings. Nora handed out one of her five-pound notes with the air of a queen. She then announced her intention of getting a suitable hat for her lovely costume.

'Will you have a white hat, miss, or a blue, or what might be called a contrast hat?'

'I will have a contrast hat,' said Nora. 'I want to look as different as ever I can from what I did when I came into the shop.'

'You will, miss, beyond doubt,' said the attendant.

Nora purchased a white straw hat with quantities of red roses on the brim. It was the sort of hat which might appeal to the taste of a low-class shop-girl of five or six and twenty. The attendant said that the price was five-and-sixpence. Nora paid for her hat and put it on. She was now in raptures with herself.

Having finally concluded her purchases with a pair of white cotton gloves and a small pink parasol, she left the shop, the attendant following her meekly with her old garments neatly folded in a parcel.

It was a curious fact that there were no glances of admiration at the poor little girl during her exit from Jellicoe's shop. She now belonged to the common herd. The wild rose had faded, but Nora was in raptures with herself.

She stepped daintily into the pony-chair and desired Pat to put her down outside the Messagers' gates.

'Don't I look fine, Pat?' said Nora as they were returning home.

'Well, miss, I can't say,' replied Pat.

'You don't agree with me? See my lovely dress! It feels so comfortable. It 's nice and long, too; it is nearly down to my ankles. I feel quite grown-up, I assure you, Pat. And my hat—aren't the flowers lovely?'

Nora removed the hat from her head as she

spoke, laid it lovingly on her knee, and looked at the terrible artificial roses which, in every shade of impossible colour, adorned it.

'I admire it immensely,' said Nora. 'I wonder what Muriel Messager will say. I am much finer than her now. Don't you think so, Pat?'

'I dunno, miss. I ain't, so to speak, eddicated in the fancy dress line.'

'No more you are—of course,' said Nora. 'Poor Pat! I am sorry for you. But, anyhow, I am very much obliged, and I have lots and lots of money left. You shall have half-a-crown, Pat, for being so good. Ah, and here we are at the Messagers' gates. I will get down now, and run up the avenue. They will be surprised when they see me. Thank you so much, Pat.'

'I 'ope to goodness,' said Pat as he pocketed his half-crown, 'that the master's eye won't light on me afore I ha' put Sam back in his stable.'

Nora made no reply to that. She opened the Messagers' gates, and found herself a minute later in the long, cool, shady avenue. She was glad of this, for she was really feeling uncommonly hot. The ready-made dress did not fit perfectly. It was too tight at the throat, and the collar was too high. The sleeves were also very long and tight, with very coarse lining, causing her poor little elbows to feel almost chafed. But, nevertheless, the dress was elegant—such a sweet cerulean blue, and trimmed with such exquisite lace. How Muriel

would envy her! And then the hat! Yes, the hat was the crowning point—such a prettily contrived contrast! Nora loved contrasts. But, somehow, it was heavy, and it would poke down over her forehead and cock itself in the most aggravating way over one ear. Nevertheless, it was a delightful hat, and she felt that her moment of triumph was at hand. She would not hurry it. She walked very slowly under the trees. She felt like a princess. She knew quite well that she was a pretty girl, and she believed, in her ignorant little heart at that moment, that she was very superior to the Messagers. But there was one thing certain: she must on no account whatever give up the rest of the twenty pounds.

She had spent already nearly two pounds ten in Jellicoe's shop. She had a large amount over. Fortunately she had a pocket in her dress, in which she now deposited the rest of her notes, gold, and silver. She then walked on slowly, occasionally glancing behind, hoping against hope that her new frock touched the ground. If it did, her very shabby boots would not be noticed. It had been awfully stupid of her not to buy a pair of new boots; but she had forgotten to do so.

On this particularly glorious and very hot summer morning, the Messager children, with Snowball, Roger, and Dandy, were having a picnic out-of-doors. Mrs Messager could not do enough to make the children happy during their last week

in the country. They were obliged to return to London in the first week of September owing to Mr Messager's business, which required his attendance in town. Mrs Messager was sorry for this, and was, therefore, all the more anxious to give the children the best time possible.

Once or twice in the course of the morning inquiries had been made with regard to Nora, but as no one was really specially interested in her—not even Muriel, for she liked her the least of the Scamp Family—the fact that she was otherwise engaged was received without comment, and the happy little party were in the best of good humours—laughing, chatting, eating, drinking, cracking jokes, performing occasionally wild somersaults on the grass, with Mrs Messager in their midst—when the slowly moving figure of Nora might be seen gliding softly among the trees.

'Whoever's that?' said Roger, raising his head and fixing his eyes on the intruder.

He did not recognise his sister in the very least. She was, it is true, still a good way off, and the flickering shadows of the trees prevented her face from being fully seen.

'Perhaps it is a friend of the servants,' said Mrs Messager. 'It cannot be anybody else. She will probably take the turn to the left in a moment. Take no notice of her, children. Now then, have you all finished? We'll say grace and then begin to plan how we'll spend the rest of the day.'

But before Mrs Messager could even begin her thanksgiving for the happy picnic meal, there came a shriek from Snowball, followed by the vulgar exclamation, 'Oh golly! Oh my stars!'

These words were followed by a succession of somersaults, during which the stout little girl shrieked, laughed, and almost screamed with mirth.

'Why, it's Nora!' she said. 'It's Nora gone and got herself up fine!'

'What?' exclaimed Mrs Messager. 'Snowball dear, behave; be quiet. Don't do that any more.'

Muriel turned very red and looked at her mother. Nora advanced languidly towards the group. She felt sure they were astonished, and no wonder. She was about to give them a good lesson. They had thought nothing of her in her shabby clothes, but they would respect her in future. It occurred to her that her manners ought to suit her frock, and she came forward mincingly, feeling rather sorry for poor Mrs Messager in her pale-gray cotton, and for Muriel in her neat white washing-dress.

'Poor things! They will be sorry, of course; but after they see what ought to be worn they will dress better in future,' thought Nora.

'I am sorry I'm late,' she said. 'I had to go in to Merton on—on business.'

'My stars!' exclaimed Snowball.

She went up to her sister and burst into fits

of laughter. Then she rolled about again on the grass.

'Oh Nora, Nora!' she said at last, when she could find her voice, 'we thoughted you was one of the servants.'

Nora's face grew almost black with fury. Was it possible that people were laughing at her?

'Are you ashamed of me?' she said suddenly, the colour leaving her face almost as fast as it had rushed to it; 'for, if you are, I will go back. I know my dress is meant more for the afternoon than the morning. I will go back if you feel that I—am too fine for any of you.'

Even Patch began to laugh. The boys were quiescent. Roger even thought the colour of the blue rather fine. Dandy wondered if Nora would get a permanent squint from the way her new and remarkable hat poked itself over one ear. Mrs Messager was the first to come to the resue.

'Sit down, dear,' she said gently.—'Snowball, behave yourself.—I am afraid you are a little hot, dear, in that dress,' she continued, turning to Nora; 'but you can take off your hat here under the cool trees; and of course there is plenty to eat.—Muriel, fetch the sandwiches and the milk for Nora. She must be thirsty.—We can keep our games until you have had your lunch, dear,' said Mrs Messager.

Nora sat down, feeling choky, small, and tired. The children had made her furious. Not for a moment had they opened her eyes to the peculiarity

of her costume. But Mrs Messager, by each word that fell from her gentle lips, made Nora feel, all of a sudden, that she was an impossible girl. Nevertheless, she fought hard in her own heart not to show her humiliation. She sank on the grass, straightened her hat, refused to remove it, and, pulling off her white cotton gloves, began to eat her sandwiches.

Snowball now watched her opportunity. She crept slowly nearer and ever nearer, and suddenly, just as Nora was raising a glass of delicious milk to her thirsty lips, wrenched off the hat from behind with a vicious pull, and ran away with it as fast as she could between the trees. In one minute Nora was chasing her. Some of the milk had fallen on the beautiful new cerulean blue dress, but that mattered nothing. Nora ran, screaming as she did so; but Snowball was quicker. All in a minute, up into a tree Snowball swarmed, the hat in her hand, her face radiant with mischief and excitement. Finally, she perched the new hat on a tall bough of the oak-tree, securing it well there so that it should not fall, and then came placidly down to meet her sister.

'Beat me if you dare!' said Snowball. 'Get the hat if you can. I'm off. I don't like property-girls, and you're a property-girl. I know now what it means, and I don't like it—not a bit.'

It was impossible to stop Snowball, but Mrs Messager would not allow Nora to be discomfited.

She came up to her just as she was about to rush after her wild little sister.

'You mustn't mind Snowball,' Mrs Messager said. 'I can see how anxious you are to look nice and to please me.'

'I did want to,' said Nora, surprised and relieved at the gentle voice.

'I can see it quite well, my dear child; and of course you wish for your hat, and Snowball is a troublesome little girl. I will desire one of the men to fetch a ladder and get it down. And now, would you like to come into the house with me?'

'No, I wouldn't. I'd rather go home,' said Nora.

'But, my dear, dear child! your poor face looks so hot and tired, and, forgive me, the collar of this dress is much too tight. I could so easily put you into one of Muriel's white frocks.'

This was the crowning indignity.

'No, thank you, indeed, Mrs Messager! I—I really do—I mean that I know my dress is a little smart for the morning; but I didn't think that you would be—*jealous* of it.'

Mrs Messager with great difficulty kept back a smile.

'I am not jealous, dear,' she said. 'Well, if you like to wear the dress, do, and we'll get the hat down.'

She took Nora's hot hand and brought her back to the others.

'Now, listen to me, children,' she said. 'I don't want Nora to be teased. She has got a new frock. Well, we all of us get new frocks now and then. She has also got a new hat; I suppose there is nothing remarkable in that fact. Snowball has been very naughty. She will have to get new frocks and hats of her own before she is much older, and when she does she won't like to be laughed at.'

'It 's such a beautiful hat, too,' said Nora, feeling, somehow, a hidden spring of unexpected sympathy in Mrs Messager's words. 'Isn't it a beautiful hat, Mrs Messager?'

'It is quite smart, dear, certainly,' said Mrs Messager; and Nora, who scarcely understood the expression, felt satisfied.

The gardener's boy brought it back, and it was placed on Nora's head again, with its wealth of golden hair.

'I am sure you are too tired for noisy games,' said Mrs Messager as she walked about in the shade with Nora. 'We can have our games after tea. I am going to read a story-book aloud to the others.'

Mrs Messager was famous for her reading aloud, and the three boys and Muriel were in raptures. Snowball was nowhere to be found. She did not choose to be punished for her daring deed. Even Patch gave up searching for her and joined the listeners to the wonderful fairy-tale.

Muriel and Nora began to walk under the trees. Muriel talked about all sorts of things, leaving a wide margin, however, in every possible direction where the subject of clothes could crop up. By degrees Nora grew cool and recovered her assurance. Muriel turned and looked at her. Their eyes met.

'I wonder why everybody laughed,' said Nora suddenly.

Muriel thought within herself, 'I wonder if I might tell her.'

'Why don't you speak?' said Nora. 'You laughed too, didn't you?'

'I tried not to very hard.'

'But why should you laugh at all? Were you jealous as well as your mother?'

'Mother—jealous—Nora dear!'

'I don't want you to call me Nora dear! You know quite well she was, and so were you.'

'It's hopeless!' thought Muriel. Aloud, she said gently, 'Mother will tell you herself presently whether she is jealous or not; but I think I may say this now, that on a very hot day one is more comfortable in cotton dresses. The one you are in must be far too heavy.'

'I like it,' said Nora stoutly. 'I never was so comfortable before in the whole course of my life.'

'And,' continued Muriel, in her placid, steady little voice, 'a sailor hat or a washing hat is much lighter for one's head.'

'Common things!' said Nora. 'I took great pains about my hat,' she continued. 'I know you naturally must be surprised at my taste. I have very good taste, haven't I?'

'See! Do see!' exclaimed Muriel. 'There's a squirrel! He's springing from bough to bough. Look! Do look! Isn't he a darling?'

Nora touched her little companion on the arm.

'You avoid my words, Muriel. I *have* got taste; I have shown it to-day.'

'Do you want me to say what I really think?' said Muriel.

'I want the truth,' said Nora in a lofty tone. 'I have got taste.'

'No,' said Muriel.

Nora stared hard at the young speaker.

'Oh, you are intolerable!' she said. 'What can be more lovely than a white hat with quantities of roses, and a dress as blue as the sky, trimmed with white lace? I know what I am like. I am like a flower. We all like the flowers for their bright colours.'

'Suppose we don't talk any more about it,' said Muriel.

'Suppose I go home,' said Nora.

'Very well,' answered Muriel.

She dropped her companion's arm. Nora turned immediately in the direction of the garden where the wall was. The ladder was now always up

against the wall. It was so easy and delightful for the two families to meet by this excellent short-cut. Over the wall went Nora; but, alack and alas! she was not accustomed to running up ladders with such an extremely long dress. She tore her skirt in the ascent, and tore the heavy, coarse lace on one of her sleeves in the descent; and, flushed and furious with anger, found herself at the other side of the wall face to face with Great-uncle Michael and Snowball.

'What—on—earth!' said Uncle Michael. 'Good gracious me! Who *is* that?'

'Me,' said Nora. 'I have been buying—some proper dresses.'

'You are a merry-andrew, a figure of fun,' said Uncle Michael; and he pointed with his gold-headed cane at the unhappy child. 'Go into the house immediately, and take off that servant finery. Put on your oldest and shabbiest dress. Never let me see you such a guy again.'

'I am staring at you, Uncle Michael,' said Snowball.

'Go into the house,' said Uncle Michael, turning his back on Snowball and fixing his angry eyes on poor Nora.

Snowball danced on in front, and put herself between him and her sister.

'I am staring harder than ever,' she said. 'Is my eyes like gimlets going into your brain, Uncle Michael?'

'Off with you both!' said Uncle Michael, raising his gold-headed cane as the fluttering Snowball kept her ground.

'I want property,' said Snowball.

'What?' said Uncle Michael.

'I—want—property,' continued Snowball. 'I can, and I will, and nothing will perwent me doing the sort of things you don't like, Great-uncle Michael, till I get property.'

Uncle Michael raised his hand to his head.

'Good heavens!' he thought, 'if these children remain here much longer I shall be carted off to a lunatic asylum.'

He did not say a word to the round, fat little girl, but, walking across the grounds, seated himself in a rustic bower, and, taking out his pipe, began to smoke. He had not enjoyed more than a few delicious whiffs when Snowball once again appeared in view.

'How nice you does look!' she said; and she squatted down on the ground in front of him. 'I love staring,' she continued, fixing her round black eyes on his face.

Uncle Michael closed his, but somehow those piercing orbs seemed to get between him and his peace of mind. Really and truly, the present state of things was enough to drive any fidgety old bachelor to despair.

'Go away,' he said.

'Property, please,' said Snowball.

'What do you want, child? I will give it to you if you will only go.'

'Money,' said Snowball.

'So you're on that tack too. A nice guy Miss Nora made of herself with the money I gave her this morning. So you want the same?'

'Half-a-crown, please,' said Snowball.

'Will you really go away if I give it to you?'

'Yes; thanks so much,' said Snowball.

The half-crown was extricated from the old gentleman's pocket, and Snowball ran off. Now she too was a person of property. It mattered little or nothing to her what the amount of wealth might be. She was even with Nora. She also had property.

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM SUMMER TO WINTER.

FROM the last week in August to the last week in November means a wide stretch of time, in a certain sense of the word. It means all the difference between the heart of glorious summer to the heart of damp, foggy, unpleasant winter. Only three little months, and yet what a difference! No sunshine anywhere, a drizzling rain coming from the sky, or a fog filling the air, slushy, greasy pavements, a world of darkness instead of a world of light.

But three months can do more than simply change the season. They can often effect a very radical and complete change in a life; and if the three Messagers and the four Darrells had guessed for a single minute what they would feel between that summer day when Nora sported in her hideous, vulgar finery, and Snowball obtained 'property' from Great-uncle Michael, and the present time, they would scarcely have believed their own eyes.

The two families were now practically one. The Moat House was shut up for the winter. Most of the servants had been dismissed, and Mr Darrell had gone away, nobody knew where. He left no

address behind him—at least, none that the children could discover. Doubtless Mr Messager knew where to find the irascible old gentleman, but no one else did. He never wrote to the Scamp Family. He never communicated with them in any way. The garden wall was no longer decorated with a ladder over which children could climb. The two places were empty and desolate.

Tom missed his little companions very much; and for that matter so did Pat. Pat and Tom had struck up a friendship over the circumstance, and delighted in exchanging reminiscences, in which Tom fought stoutly and resolutely for Patch as quite the nicest and most plucky young lady in the world, and Pat, as in duty bound, upheld the virtues both of Snowball and Nora. But the confidences and occasionally the quarrels between the two boys were of little consequence to the children who had left the old place and who were leading altogether new lives in the big house in Eaton Square.

The house was a large one. There were plenty of servants; there was every attainable luxury. When Mrs Messager had an 'at home' day, rows of carriages were to be seen waiting outside. In the evening Mrs Messager as often as not went out to dinner somewhere, and Nora and Muriel and Snowball and Patch used to love to watch her as she glided downstairs in her beautiful dinner-dress,

with diamonds in her hair and a rich opera-cloak wrapped round her shoulders.

Nora had learned a good many things in these three months. She was really now attaining to a certain degree of that valuable commodity called good taste. She never spoke about the blue cerulean frock with its cheap white lace, or about the white hat with its hideous artificial roses. She wore the same sort of costumes that Muriel wore, and went to the same school with Muriel every morning and came back with her in the afternoon, and studied her lessons under Miss Peters's direction, and looked like a pretty but rather ordinary little girl. The daring and fun of the old days seemed to have forsaken Nora, who seldom or never now was heard to sing, and who performed her tasks with a certain amount of regularity. She was, in fact, a completely altered Nora; but whether she was improved or not remained to be seen. Outwardly she was much improved, being a quick child and able to learn her lessons and to understand what was good form or bad form, what was considered lady-like or the reverse.

Snowball was still very round, very fat, and slightly unmanageable; but even Snowball had succumbed to the awful and overpowering weight of circumstances. It is true, she was exceedingly fond of sliding down the banister from the top to the bottom of the big house; but when she was punished somewhat severely, and in a way she did

not at all like, for this dangerous trick, she thought it best to abstain. She was devoted to Patch. Patch could help her without preaching to her—a thing Snowball never could bear. Patch and Snowball did their lessons together with Miss Peters, having no masters except for dancing, which they both enjoyed, and in which Snowball already excelled.

The boys were ordinarily good at school, and, all things considered, Mr and Mrs Messager felt that they had done a good deed by rescuing these children from their wild and semi-savage life.

But there is an old proverb that 'truth will out,' and there came a time during the last days of November when Snowball and Nora put this proverb rather severely to the test.

Snowball had never really passionately loved her sister; but the sense of kinship assailed the little girl rather forcibly when she first arrived at the great house in Eaton Square, and she had begged, with a persistence which appealed to Mrs Messager's motherly heart, that the two might occupy one bedroom. Accordingly, a large room had been assigned to the sisters at the top of the house, and it was in that room that the mischief which I am about to relate occurred.

It had been a very foggy afternoon. The fog was so thick that you could, according to Mr Messager, cut it with a knife. The children were all present at the early dinner, which they partook

of with Mr and Mrs Messager when he made this remark, and Snowball had looked at him with black eyes of interest as he uttered it. She said nothing at the time, but glanced at Nora, who was scarcely listening.

'It is not safe to go out,' said Mr Messager. 'Girls, you will have to give up your dancing-lesson this afternoon; it is quite impossible for the horses to take you as far as Bayswater.'

'Then why does you go out?' said Snowball.

'I go because I have to,' was the answer. 'With little children it is not a necessity, and it is safer not.—My dear,' he added, turning to his wife, 'you had best ring up Madame Cerbelli on the telephone, and let her know.'

Mrs Messager promised to do so, and the children, with their usual good town-house manners, as Nora expressed it, left the room. When they got into the hall Nora exclaimed crossly, 'What a nuisance! I am quite certain the fog isn't a bit dangerous.'

'Course not,' said Snowball.

'Well, I suppose father knows,' said Muriel. 'It's perfectly awful to be lost in a fog. Once I was very nearly lost.'

'Oh, was you?' said Snowball excitedly. 'Do tell us about it, please, Babs.'

Muriel promised to do so presently. She must go and practise, she said, just now. She shook off Snowball's fat little hand, and ran up to practise for an hour on the schoolroom piano. Snowball,

her eyes gleaming with mischief, said to Patch, 'Isn't you ever naughty in this great, dreadful house?'

'Oh Snowball!' said Patch, 'how can you call our beautiful home a big, dreadful house? You know perfectly well that we have a lovely home, and I did think you were happy here.'

'Happy!' said Snowball, turning her head aside. Her eyes filled with sudden tears. Patch had time to observe her. She sprang forward and caught the little girl's hand.

'What is it, Victoria?' she said.

'Don't call me by that name. I won't have it.'

'But mother says'——

'I don't mind what your mother says. I hate, hate—oh, I *hate* your dreadful London!'

'The fogs are bad, of course,' said Patch; 'but then we London children are accustomed to them, and make the best of them. Perhaps the fog may get less bad presently, and we may be able to go for a walk.'

'I don't care for a walk,' said Snowball. 'I want to dance. We were to begin to learn the shawl-dance to-day. We could easily have gone.'

'No, we couldn't,' said Patch in her resolute voice. 'Father says not, and there's an end of it. Now, Snowball, will you learn your lessons for to-morrow, so that we can have a right good time in the evening? Mother is sure to think of something delightful for to-night; she always does on

these long, dark, dismal days; or will you play, as usual?'

'I'll play for a bit. I have a headache,' said Snowball. 'I won't do hard lessons now.'

Patch looked as though she longed to persuade Snowball to alter her mind, but at that moment Nora came in. Nora's face was white, and she looked tired.

'I am going up to lie down in my room,' she said. 'I can't stand the noise of Muriel strumming on the schoolroom piano. I will come down to tea.'

'Might I come with you?' said Snowball.

Her dancing eyes looked full at her sister. Nora looked back at her. It seemed as if all of a sudden they understood one another. A thought was moving in both their brains, and they must give utterance to it.

'Come if you like,' she said.

'Then you won't do lessons now,' said Patch. 'It does seem a pity, for mother is sure to have a lovely plan for to-night.'

Nora turned away without troubling to reply, and Snowball followed her upstairs. As soon as ever they got there, and had shut the door of the bedroom, Snowball said to Nora, 'Couldn't us be naughty just for once?'

'We can't in this house,' said Nora. 'There is no way of being naughty.'

'Oh yes, there is,' said Snowball. 'We could

easily go to Madame Cerbelli and have our beautiful dance.'

'What!' said Nora, her eyes sparkling.

'Why, course,' said Snowball; 'I isn't afraid of fog. Is you?'

Nora went to the window and looked out. The fog was very thick and very black, but she thought she could see the pavement at the opposite side, and just the shadowy outline of the trees in the centre of Eaton Square.

'I don't suppose it's so bad,' she said; 'but still'——

'Let's do it!' said Snowball. 'Nobody need know, and we'll ask every single policeman we meet until we get there. It would be such fun, and we can—can't we?'

'It seems rather wrong,' said Nora. Still, she paused to consider. The shawl-dance was rather difficult, and Madame Cerbelli's pupils were to give an exhibition of their power in a month's time from now, just at the break-up. There were no girls in her class who danced quite as well as Nora and Snowball. They had a natural aptitude for it. But the shawl-dance was *the* test. It was exceedingly difficult. There would be a prize given to the girl who danced it best, and she would be the admiration of the many ladies and gentlemen who looked on. It would certainly be a cruel pity to miss it on this occasion, and there was nothing in the world to prevent Nora and Snowball from going.

As to the fog, that was absurd. They could easily find their way. There would be no difficulty in leaving the house either; for they could slip down the back-stairs, which would be quite deserted at present, as the servants would all be at their dinner. Mrs Messager would not miss them, for she would think they were resting in their bedroom. Muriel and Patch would be busy over their work. Yes; it was a golden opportunity.

'You 're not a bit frightened, are you, Snowball?' said Nora.

'I—frightened!' said Snowball. 'I'd like to cut it with a knife. Perhaps I could cut it open and let the light in. I'll take a knife out with me.'

'Oh, you silly!' said Nora. 'That is only a form of speech.'

She stood for a minute considering. Her face, which had been so listless, brightened. She turned to her little sister.

'I've a good mind to try. There won't be much difficulty, and Madame Cerbelli always keeps our dresses for us, so we can change there. We'll be back again before the others miss us, and we'll beg of madame as a great favour not to tell that we have been at our class. Then, how surprised Muriel and Patch will be next Wednesday when they find how cleverly we'll manage the shawl-dance! Oh yes, Snowball, let's do it; it will be fun.'

'Fun, fun! great fun!' half-chanted Snowball. 'Fun, fun! lovely fun!' she repeated. 'Let's do it! Let's do it!'

She danced across the room and opened the heavy wardrobe where their outdoor things were kept. Nora condescended to help her little sister and fetch from its peg in the wardrobe a warm winter jacket which Snowball wore. It was soon put on, as well as a scarlet handkerchief round her neck; then Snowball's fur cap was securely fastened on her head. She danced before the long mirror, nodding to herself and repeating over and over, 'Fun, fun! lovely fun!' showing her white teeth as she danced, and allowing her black eyes to sparkle with the very soul of mischief.

'Oh, I have been good so long!' she said, turning to Nora; 'it's so 'licious to be real naughty again!'

Nora, compared to Snowball, was, of course, quite a grown-up girl. She would be thirteen her next birthday, and ought to have known a great deal better than her little sister. Nevertheless, she too longed for fun, and for a real, desperate bout of naughtiness. All the spirit which had animated her in the old garden at home, when she had climbed trees, and sung tantalising songs, and made the boys obey her, and annoyed Great-uncle Michael from morning till night, swept back over her. Forgotten were the lessons instilled so carefully by kind Mrs Messager; forgotten was the

dull house, with its dull routine of work, work, and goodness, goodness. Nora in her heart of hearts was half a savage, and she wanted a bit of savagedom once more.

In a minute she too was dressed for their expedition in her fur cap, which looked sweetly becoming on her head of golden curls, her little fur jacket to match, and her neat brown dress coming a little below her knees. All her appointments were neat, good, as perfect as Mrs Messager could make them.

'Now, we will be off,' said Snowball. 'Do let's hurry. The servants will have done their dinner, and some one will catch us if we're not quick.'

'There is one thing I must take with me,' said Nora.

'What's that?' asked Snowball.

'My money. I can't go without some money. We're going to have a real bit of fun, and as we are quite certain to be discovered, however hard we try not to, we may as well go to a good restaurant or some place of refreshment before we come home again. You know I am a person of property, don't you, Snowball?'

'And so is I,' said Snowball. 'Golly, that is good! I'd a'most forgotten my half-crown. I'll take it 'long with me.'

'Oh! what's half-a-crown?' said Nora in a contemptuous voice.

'It's a good lot of pennies, anyway,' said Snowball; 'and I'll take it. See if I don't.'

She opened the drawer where her treasure was kept wrapped up in chamois leather. Nora selected from her store, which she had carefully concealed from Mrs Messager and Muriel, five golden sovereigns. She thought these would be enough even for an entertainment on quite a vast scale. She had a small sealskin purse, which she slipped into the pocket of her fur jacket.

Now the sisters were quite ready. They looked at each other. Snowball caught hold of Nora's hand and danced excitedly up and down.

'Fun, fun! glorious fun!' she said.

The fog was so thick that in the bedroom it was quite dark. But what did that matter? They opened the door, found the back-stairs, and crept down. It was really dangerous, for this was such a dreadful night-sort of day that the electric light was ablaze all over the house, and any one who came out of the servants' hall could see the little girls as they started on their pilgrimage. But Mrs Messager's housekeeper was celebrated for her excellent kitchen-dinners, and Mrs Messager was the sort of lady who believed that servants required at least an hour's relaxation in the middle of the day. Accordingly, although shrieks of fun and laughter proceeded from the kitchen regions, no one heard the steps of the two children as they went downstairs; no one observed them as they

crossed the back hall, and, opening a side-door which was on the latch, ran swiftly up the area-steps. Had cook been in the kitchen she would have seen them; but she happened to be in the servants' hall.

The next minute they were in the street. A minute later the fog swallowed them up. In three minutes' time they could no more have got back to the Messagers' tall, stately house unguided by some one than they could have flown. It was not nice to be out in a fog. It was Nora who first made this discovery. As to Snowball, she kept on repeating restlessly under her breath, 'Fun, fun! glorious fun!' but her words came a little faintly and were dulled, somehow, by the fog.

A minute or two later she uttered a piercing shriek, for a great dray, with its horses magnified by the fog, seemed to have every intention of walking right over her. Nora pulled her aside, and she stood panting by an iron railing.

'It's *rather* smelly!' she said, looking up at her sister as she spoke.

She could still see Nora's face, which no longer looked quite so fair, for the terrible black fog was streaking it with all kinds of awful colours.

Nora made no reply.

'Why are we standing still?' said Snowball.

'We are waiting for a policeman,' said Nora. 'I know exactly how we ought to go to Madame Cerbelli's when there isn't a fog, for I have often

walked there with Muriel and Miss Peters; but somehow the place looks different to-night.'

'It isn't night; it's day!' exclaimed Snowball. The next minute she gave a joyful laugh. 'It sort of hurts my eyes,' she said, 'and makes me cough; but Mr Messager said you could cut it with a knife. I brought mine out. I am going to do it.'

She thrust her hand into her pocket, took out a small penknife, opened it, and made several lunges in all directions. Her ineffectual efforts made not the slightest difference to the fog, but they caused a girl of about Nora's age to exclaim angrily, 'If you want to commit a crime in the open street, or cut my nose off, I'll call the perlice —fast enough; so you give me this here knife.'

There never perhaps was anybody with so much of the fighting spirit in her as Snowball. Not even the terrors of the fog could subdue her courage. It is true that she shut up the knife, saying in a resigned voice to Nora, 'Mr Messager told a lie. Let's come on.'

Just for a minute she caught a peep of a wild, half-human face peering close to hers. It was only the girl's face—the girl who had objected to her nose being cut off. Then it vanished into darkness, and the children moved on a few paces.

'We shall be late for our class,' said Snowball; 'and the fog sort of chokes my chest. I don't like it much; do you, Nora?'

'Detestable, horrid thing, like everything else

in London!' said Nora. 'But you are right; we had better walk on. We're pretty safe as long as we cling to this railing.' They went on about a dozen yards. 'I wonder we can't find a policeman,' continued Nora. 'I don't feel as if I could cross over there. Do you see, Snowball, that street to the right where all the bright lights are burning? If I could get there I believe I'd know my way quite well. That's a very, very wide street, and it goes on a long, very long way; and at the end you find a side street. The side street is called Rossiter Row, and Rossiter Row leads into Rossiter Terrace, and Madame Cerbelli's house is 7 Rossiter Terrace.'

'Oh, do let's cross!' said Snowball. 'Who's afraid?'

'I am,' said Nora. 'Do you hear all those shrieks? And the horses are going so slowly, and it's a long, long way across to where the lights are.'

'I'm shivering with cold,' said Snowball. 'I do wish we might stop and have our fun, and not go as far as Madame Cerbelli's after all. What I want is fun; and I have property; so have you.'

'Well, we'll see,' said Nora, whose great desire to learn the shawl-dance was considerably damped by the icy cold of the fog and the poison which was filling her lungs and causing her throat and eyes to ache.

By-and-by a gruff-looking man knocked violently against the two children. He muttered something

which might have been 'I beg your pardon,' and would have passed on if Snowball had not caught him by his coat-tails.

'You are going across?' she said.

'Gemini!' he exclaimed, 'what does the young un mean?'

'We want to go to the lights over there,' said Snowball. 'May we hang on to your coat-tails and come with you?'

The man suggested that perhaps a hand held by each young lady would be a safer proceeding. They could not possibly see his face, but they did feel that his hands were very large and very rough, for he clutched Nora's hand so tightly that he nearly hurt her, and he held Snowball so loosely that she could hardly keep up with him. But, with many exclamations and loud words and shrieks from the passers-by, the three did find themselves at the other side of the wide crossing.

'There now!' he said, turning to the children, 'I have yer safe.' His whole tone altered. 'Pretty little dears!' he said in a whining voice, 'can you give a poor hungry man something to eat and drink? It's truth I'm telling yer when I say that I haven't touched a morsel this blessed day.'

'Oh, you must be empty in your inside!' said Snowball.

This remark was very much to the point, and the man laid his hand across the region of his body indicated by Snowball's words.

'We did think of going to a restaurant, didn't we, Nora,' said the little girl, 'and having something to eat? And perhaps the poor, kind, big man might come with us.'

Nora was dubious. The fact is, she was thoroughly frightened, and would have given all the sovereigns in her pocket to be back home again. But Snowball, cheered by the light which shone brightly from rows of gaily lit shops where they now stood, had lost every scrap of fear.

'Do let's be quick!' she said. 'Do let's give him something or take him to a restaurant.'

'We want to go to our dancing-class,' said Nora with dignity. 'We have no sort of time to take you to a restaurant now, man; but of course I will give you something, for you have been kind.'

It suddenly occurred to her that she had nothing on her person except five sovereigns. She had no idea of the true value of money, but she did know that a sovereign was a great deal too much to give the man. She turned, therefore, to her little sister.

'Where's your half-crown?' she said. 'Give him that.'

'I!' said Snowball. 'That I won't!'

She squared her little figure just as she used to do in the little garden at home, and looked defiant. Some passers-by knocked her roughly, and she would have fallen had not the burly man held her up. He now turned to Nora.

'I know these parts,' he said, 'and I know that

you have kind hearts, little ladies. If you was to trust me, now, to go and get you a bit of change, why, I'd promise faithful—I'd take my—affy-david on it.'

'What's that?' asked Snowball.

'An oath, miss; no less.'

'That's wicked,' said Snowball.

'I'm very empty in my inside, miss.'

'I forgive you,' said Snowball. 'Give him some money, Nora, and let him bring back the change. —It's a funny world,' she continued. '*What* will you bring it back on—your affy-david? Is that a tray or a plate?'

'I told you, miss, it was an oath. But be quick!'

The man became very rough, for he knew that at any moment the police might attack him, and it so happened that just then a belated officer of the law did put in a solemn appearance. He looked at the little group of three, told the man curtly to move off—he'd better—and then addressed the children. The man skulked away and was absolutely lost in the darkness, and Nora could not help breathing a sigh of relief.

'He was a very bad man, Snowball,' she said, her teeth chattering.

'What can I do for you, missies?' said Constable Z in a most affable voice. 'Have you lost your way, now?'

Nora felt very much inclined to say 'Yes,' and that their real address was 19 Eaton Square. Had

she done so all their future troubles would have been averted, for the kind policeman would himself have conveyed them home. But Snowball had no idea of giving up her fun.

'We want a nice, nice shop,' she said, 'where they sell all sorts of good things.'

'What sort of good things, missie?'

'Things to eat—chocolate and sweetmeats, and tea and coffee perhaps, and cakes perhaps, and ices perhaps.'

'My word!' said the policeman, 'you don't want ices to-day.'

Snowball laughed, and even in the thickness of the fog her black eyes sparkled and her white teeth gleamed.

'But where are you going really?' he said.

'I will tell you,' said Nora.—'Snowball, do stop talking; don't be silly!—We are going, kind Mr Policeman'——

'Yes, kind Mr Policeman,' echoed Snowball, 'we are going to Madame Cerbelli's. She is a beautiful mistress for teaching you to dance. Do you dance, Mr Policeman?'

'I'm on my beat,' said the man, 'and can't stop listening to no nonsense. Where does this dancing-lady hold out?'

'Her address,' said Nora—'Snowball, do be quiet!—her address is 7 Rossiter Terrace, and I know it isn't very far from here.'

'Never heard of it—'tain't on my beat,' said the

policeman. 'What you'd best do is this: go straight along this street, which is fairly safe, until you find another man dressed like me, and then ask him. Don't you go down no side streets, and don't you go talking to no loafers. That man you were talking to just now, he ain't at all a safe party; he'd think nothing of robbing you and taking every penny you possess.'

'We're both persons of property,' said Snowball.

'Well, be careful you don't give it to him. I'd go with you myself, but I am bound in the other direction. Now then, off you go, straight ahead, and don't ask any one your way except an officer dressed the same as me. He'll see you right through; any one else—man, woman, or child—is dangerous.'

'Thank you very much, Mr Police,' said Snowball; 'and I do wish you danced and could have lessons in the shawl-dance from Madame Cerbelli.'

The policeman did not think it worth while to reply to these aspirations on the part of Snowball, but moved away, and, like every one else on this extraordinary day, was immediately, so to speak, swallowed up.

'Isn't it awful!' said Snowball, after a pause, as the two moved on together.

'What?' asked Nora. 'We needn't walk quite so slowly here, Snowball; I am perfectly perished with the cold, and there's light enough from the shop windows to help us to go a little faster.'

'But every one's dangerous,' said Snowball. 'That little girl in the blue frock holding the hand of that nice gentleman—she's dangerous. Every one's dangerous—'cept Mr Policeman. It is queer.'

Just then the two sisters found themselves in front of a very large shop where a crowd of people was collected looking in at the brightly lighted windows. Inside were a number of small tables —tables meant for two and tables meant for three. All the tables seemed to be surrounded by people, and the people were eating and drinking, talking and laughing; and girls in white caps, and dark dresses, and aprons with bibs were rushing here and there supplying people with what seemed to give them each pleasure. Whether the children thought of going into the shop can never be quite ascertained. Had they not done so they might have met another policeman, who might in the end have got them as far as Madame Cerbelli's, who would certainly have sent them home again in a cab. But just as they were hesitating Snowball pulled Nora's hand very hard.

'Let's come right in—right in!' she said. 'The man who is called a loafer, and who said he'd bring us our change on an affy-david, is staring in at the window. He'll catch on to us again if we're not quick. Come in—come in!'

'Yes,' said Nora, 'I'm coming.'

She had a queer sort of fear over her with

regard to the man who, in his way, had been kind enough, but whom she dreaded more than words could say. The fact is, she had caught a glimpse of his cunning eyes, and that glimpse was not reassuring.

The shop was full of fog, but still, compared to the outside world, it was quite a paradise. The little girls were jostled by people coming and going, and at first could not find a single empty table; but presently one of the young women in dark dresses with white caps and aprons came up to them and asked them what they wanted.

'Something to eat, and somewhere to sit,' said Nora.

The waitress immediately told them to follow her, and, rather to their relief, took them up a long flight of stairs, where was another room quite as big as the one below. Here a lovely little marble table meant to accommodate two was discovered, and Nora and Snowball seated themselves.

Now their fun might begin! Now their troubles were over! Snowball removed her fur cap and her black hair right up from her forehead. She sighed with a sense of relief.

'It is 'licious here!' she said. 'Fun, fun! glorious fun!'

'You mustn't sing aloud in a place like this,' said Nora.

'Can't help myself. I feel sort of—sort of—as

if I'd like to turn somersaults all down the room from one end to the other.'

'Then you can't,' said Nora; 'so keep your feelings to yourself.'

She spoke sternly. There was no saying what Snowball would not do; she was such a terribly unconventional, independent child. A nice-looking young woman came up for orders; and Nora, after consulting the menu, ordered poached eggs and ices. For drink she decided to have gingerbeer. Snowball was agreeable to this fare, and while the girl went away to get it she began to talk about poor Mr Loafer.

'I don't like him—*much*. Do you, Nora?'

'I don't like him at all,' said Nora.

'Mr Policeman didn't like him either.'

'No; the policeman said he was a bad sort of man.'

'No, he didn't; he said the man was a loafer. Is there anything wrong in being a loafer? It sounds to me all right—doesn't it to you?'

'Mr Police didn't think so,' said Nora.

'He was so funny about bringing us back the change on an affy-david; and whatever is an oath? I'm sort o' puzzled,' said Snowball. 'He was empty in his inside, too, poor Mr Loafer!'

The young woman came up with a tray which contained poached eggs on toast, exceedingly good and appetising, and also some sad-looking, watery ices. She presently reappeared with stone bottles of gingerbeer. She filled two glasses for the little

sisters, and then laid a piece of paper on the table.

'Whatever can that be?' said Snowball in great astonishment.

The girl smiled, came back, and condescended to explain.

'You are not accustomed to A. B. C.'s; I can tell that, missie.'

'I know perfectly, the whole way along,' said Snowball in a voice of great indignation. 'I will say it if you'll wait to hear me. A—B—C—D—E—F'——

'That ain't quite what I meant, miss. This is what is called an A. B. C. shop.'

'Did you ever see a loafer?' suddenly interrupted Snowball, 'and was your change brought back to you on an affy-david?'

The girl looked significantly at Nora. Was the little one quite right in her head?

'Are you far from your homes, missies?' she asked.

'We are going to Madame Cerbelli when we have had enough to eat,' said Nora in that slightly condescending, slightly keep-your-distance tone which always rather impressed people. 'Have you ever heard of her? She teaches the shawl-dance.'

The girl regretted she had not. Some one shouted 'Serve' in an angry voice in the distance, and the girl said in a hurried tone that she must be going.

'When you have eaten all you want,' she added, bending towards the children, 'you'll take that bit of paper to the desk over there, and you'll pay for what you have eaten. It comes to one-and-twopence exactly. Now, remember: one shilling and twopence. I hope you will get to madame the shawl-dancer safely, but it 's an awful fog.'

She vanished to attend to other customers, and the girls ate their eggs without much appetite, Snowball remarking at intervals that she hoped poor Mr Loafer's inside was not getting worse. Nora's sole feeling was a dread that she might meet him once again.

At last they had finished their meal, and, guided by the instructions of the girl, went to the desk to pay. Nora watched what others did, and then put her little ticket on a sort of mat made of india-rubber knobs. Snowball stood on tiptoe to look at her.

'*That's* an affy-david!' she said. 'I'll buy one with some of my property.'

'Hush! Do hush!' said Nora.

The girl at the desk said, 'Pay, please;' and Nora put a whole sovereign on the little mat. She was given what seemed to be a great deal more money than she had parted with. She collected her change quickly and popped it into her purse.

'It 's fit to burst—your purse is,' said Snowball.

'You might, now you might, if you did meet poor Mr Loafer, give him some of that money to get his inside filled up. I am sorry for poor Mr Loafer.'

They left the shop, to find the fog more than ever in that condition in which Mr Messager said it could be cut with a knife. They walked on a few steps, and were much puzzled how to proceed, for all of a sudden a fresh difficulty met them. The shops were left behind, and with them that radiance and light which made the footpath tolerably safe. In front of them was a wall of absolute blackness. They dared not proceed.

'What are we to do? Where are we to go?' said Snowball. 'I am ever so cold,' she continued. 'I think,' she added, in a meditative voice, 'that ices isn't good on days when there's black fogs that you can cut with a knife. I has got a pain in my little middle!'

'We'll walk fast, and it'll go off,' said Nora.

'We can't. How can we go into that wall of blackness.'

'Catch on to coat-tails, will you, now?' said a familiar voice.

'Oh, Mr Loafer!' gasped Snowball. 'And have you found your—affy-david?' she continued. 'You're a very, very wicked man; Mr Police says so, but I don't mind. Oh! do let's walk with you across to another shining street, where shops are.'

'No,' said Mr Loafer roughly, 'not for a single blessed minute till I've made terms.'

'What are terms?' asked Snowball.

'I was cheated last time; I won't be cheated again.'

'It's awful to be cheated,' said Snowball. 'I was once, long time ago, in the garden at home. Dandy pretended that he'd give me a peach if I'd run a long way for him—oh, to fetch him something—and when I came back he ate it all his own self. Did ever any one serve you like that, Mr Loafer?'

'Yes, and worse,' said Mr Loafer—'and much worse. I've been treated disgraceful by the British public, and owe 'em a grudge; and, what's more, I'll pay 'em. Now, look here; a shilling from you and a shilling from you if I take you across to the farther road.'

'Will two shillings buy enough for you to fill your inside?' asked Snowball.

'Yes,' said Mr Loafer roughly.

Nora produced her purse. She did not observe how Mr Loafer's eyes shone. She took out two shillings and presented them to him. To Snowball's amazement, he immediately put them in his mouth, lodging them comfortably beside his cheek. This was an astounding performance which she thought she would cultivate when she got home. It seemed so simple, too. She supposed he was getting a sort of nourishment out of them.

'Come along, and be quick!' he said roughly.

He caught each girl's hand, and, notwithstanding the most imminent danger and hairbreadth escapes, managed to convey them to another region of brightly illuminated shops. There is no doubt whatever that they had a frightful passage across; that they were jogged unmercifully and pressed unnecessarily; that Snowball felt several times as though her little hand was going to be wrested from her body; that Nora was nearly lifted off her feet once or twice; that horses' heads became quite familiar objects bending down and looking at you from a very little way off; that the noise of cabmen swearing and shouting seemed to be the complete order of the hour.

Nevertheless, they *were* safely across, and, what was still better, the moment they got across Mr Loafer took off his exceedingly shabby hat or cap, or whatever sort of head-covering he wore, and shouted to them 'Good-evening' in a civil voice, and absolutely vanished.

'Oh! I am glad he is gone,' said Nora.

'Wasn't it funny his putting his shillings in his mouth?' said Snowball. 'I am going to do that constant now. He was able to talk quite well when they were in his cheek. I wished I could see if they were noticed outside, but the fog was so thick I couldn't.'

It was just at that moment that poor Nora uttered an exclamation.

They were penniless little girls, absolutely lost in the middle of a London fog!

PAGE 197.

'Oh!' she gasped. 'Oh!'

'Nora—is it the ices? Is it your middle hurting you?'

'It's every part of me that's hurting me,' said Nora. 'My purse is gone! Mr Loafer has taken it no doubt. I haven't a penny. All my money is gone!'

Snowball felt with frantic haste for her half-crown, but that too was missing. They were penniless little girls, absolutely lost in the middle of a London fog!

CHAPTER XV.

DANGERS OF FOG.

PENNILESS little girls were never yet known to be happy in such a predicament. The cold of a fog is all very well to experience when you know that you can go into comfortable restaurants and order something—a cup of coffee or hot tea or cocoa, or some other such luxury. The stinging of the fog in your eyes and the choking of the fog in your throat and chest are also quite endurable when you are convinced that at any moment a kind policeman may meet you and take you by the hand and put you into a cab which will land you either at Madame Cerbelli's or at 19 Eaton Square. Penniless little girls are in quite a different predicament. They cannot possibly order hot drinks, and they cannot venture to secure the services of a cabman who might or might not drive them safely to their destination.

Nora wondered, when it was quite too late, why she had not thought of a cab before. She could see them at intervals moving very slowly through the blackness. She had not noticed them while her little purse was full of gold and silver. Now they seemed to mock at her. As to Snowball, she

did not actually cry, for she was too plucky for that, but she was much puzzled. She regretted the loss of her half-crown, but not exactly as Nora regretted the loss of her money. She wanted to feel the joy of the half-crown in her cheek. It would be a new way of spending her property —a saving way, too. It would be altogether a fascinating sensation, and if it did not look very remarkable, she might exercise it during the dull hours of lessons, practising skilfully the removal of the coin from the left cheek to the right, and so back again.

As far as she could tell, the coin in the mouth did not interfere with speech, for Mr Loafer spoke quite well although he had two shillings in his cheek. But there—the thing was hopeless; her property was lost!

She looked up at last at Nora.

'Shall us walk on?' she said.

Nora looked down at her.

'Do you really comprehend what has happened, Snowball?'

'Yes; Mr Policeman said that Mr Loafer would rob us. I remember his words quite well. He has; he's a very bad man. My half-crown has gone, and I can't have any fun with it now any more. Your sovereigns are gone, and you can't have any fun with them. Still, I suppose we'd better walk on.'

'Oh!' said Nora. 'Oh!'

She moved on a few steps. Snowball was not really depressed. She was too excited for that. They were now in the region of lovely shops; not shops that contained eatables any more, but shops that had all sorts of toys: Christmas toys, dolls of all shapes and sizes and degrees of excellence; baby dolls smooth as wax all over, dolls that could raise their arms to a given angle, dolls sitting in their baths—Snowball felt certain they were very cold, poor things! Then there were boy-dolls and girl-dolls, large dolls and small dolls, dolls with flaxen hair and blue eyes, and dolls with black hair and black eyes. There were little trunks, too, exposed in this fascinating shop-window, with all sorts of dolls' clothes peeping out from under their half-shut lids. And there were other toys besides, animals of every sort and description: donkeys, horses, dogs, guinea-pigs, mice, giraffes, rabbits, even sweet little squirrels, all looking so lovely!

Snowball was not a doll-worshipping child, but she adored animals, and she stood now in silent ecstasy looking at these wonders of the toy-maker's art. Nora, whose eyes were really full of tears, partly caused by the fog and partly by her tremendous money-loss, tugged violently at her little sister's hand.

'Oh, come on—come on, Snowball! We can't stand all the time at this shop-window.'

'I want to go in and buy,' said Snowball. 'I want to buy lots of things: two or three squirrels

—aren't they just sweet?—and that little box with the mother-dog and all the puppies. There are four little pups; and the mother-dog looks so—so perfectly lovely. Oh dear, oh dear! I do wish I could buy quite half what's in the shop. Do let's go in, Nora!'

'Where's the use?' said Nora. 'Don't you know, you silly child, that we have got no money, that that dreadful Mr Loafer has robbed us of every penny we possessed?'

This fact seemed to bring home very forcibly to Snowball what had just occurred, and she no longer glued her face to the shop-window, but walked forward with her sister in a resigned manner.

'Somehow,' she said, 'the fun isn't quite so glorious as it was—is it, Nora?'

'It is no longer fun,' said Nora; 'but I do wish we could get to Madame Cerbelli's. I could borrow enough from her to take a cab home.'

'Well, let's walk,' said Snowball.

They went forward. The shops continued to beckon and allure them. Oh! the pretty and wonderful shops, decking themselves already in their Christmas finery; the shops with spangling, glittering things; the shops with marvellous picture-books; then, again, the shops with cakes: frosted cakes, plum-cakes looking so black and rich and delicious! Snowball's appetite began to come back. She had not eaten a great deal in the A. B. C. shop.

She wished she had done more justice to her poached eggs on toast.

'I wish we could get to Madame Cerbelli's; I wish I could be dancing about; I wish I could be hot once again,' she said.

They walked on, Nora's heart feeling like lead; Nora herself shivering violently and feeling more ill and wretched, more thoroughly downcast and depressed, than she had ever been in her life before. Oh, how she longed now for the warm, pleasant schoolroom with its cheerful fire! How intensely she sighed for the company of good-natured Miss Peters, for Muriel's dear, sweet face, for Mrs Messager, for the hot tea which must be going on just now in the schoolroom at Eaton Square! How she wished with all her heart and soul and strength that she had not been such a naughty, defiant girl!

But where was the use of wishing? She could no more get home than she could fly. She was a long, long way from home. Home was swallowed up completely in the black London fog. Between her and home bristled a whole army of dangers: stumbling horses, flying motor-cars, angry men, frightened women, screaming children; and everywhere blackness—blackness, through which she could not see a single inch. Her only chance was to keep in the neighbourhood of the shops, which she sincerely hoped did go on as far as Rossiter Row. In the confusion of her mind she could not

remember whether they did or not; but she hoped against hope.

Snowball, clinging to Nora's hand, was not nearly so frightened as her elder sister. In the first place, she had naturally more courage; in the second, she had Nora to appeal to. Nora, being so very tall and grown-up, was a sort of refuge to the younger child.

At last they came, as was fully to be expected, to another impenetrable wall of fog. The pavement seemed suddenly to stop. The fog was blacker than ever, for night—the real, true night—was coming on. No twinkling lamps could be seen. One more step and the children would be swallowed up in the fog. They stood irresolute on the very edge of this vast and awful wilderness. Behind them was the pavement, only faintly visible through the ever-increasing darkness. Behind them were the shops; in front of them was what they could not dare to face.

'What *are* we to do?' said Nora suddenly.

'Can't we go on?' said Snowball; but her voice sounded very faint and piping.

'No, I daren't!' said Nora.

'Poor Mr Loafer would be better than nothing,' ventured Snowball.

'No, he wouldn't. Oh, what are we to do? I know we must be close—close to Rossiter Row now. I am sure it's just at the other side of this great, black, awful fog.'

'Let's run and shout all the way,' suggested Snowball. 'Let's shout at the very top of our voices. Let's say, "Hi, there! Back, there! Girls coming along! Make way for 'em! make way for 'em!" Oh! let's do it, Nora. I am so cold, and my middle does hurt so!'

'We can't go; we can't,' said Nora; and just then she started because there was a touch on her arm—quite a gentle touch; and, looking round, she saw a woman.

The woman, at least, could not be a *Mr* Loafer. The woman was dressed with a certain amount of respectability—that is, she wore a very neat shawl put on corner-wise and made of shepherd's plaid. She had a small bonnet which kept hitching itself on to the back of her head, and her hair, as far as Nora could see for the fog, was gray and scanty. Her eyes and features seemed quite blurred and indistinct, but that was doubtless caused by the fog. She had a gentle voice, however, and a soft touch. She bent down over Nora and looked her over from head to foot.

'Now, missie,' she said, 'whatever are you and your little sister doing out on an awful night like this? Is there nothing as I can do for you?'

'You're dangerous!' said Snowball immediately. 'Mr Policeman said you was.'

The woman started back with an exclamation, more astonished than angry.

'Why, my dear,' she said, 'wherever did you see

me before that you should give me a cha*rak*ter of that sort?'

'Mr Policeman said,' continued Snowball, 'that every man, woman, and child out in this fog was dangerous—'cept men like himself.'

The woman gave a sniff.

'Wery well, wery well; jest as *you* like. I am going on—I am going to keep along by these 'ouses, feeling my way as I go. You can foller me or not—jest as *you* please; it don't matter nothink at all to me.'

'Oh, but are there houses?' said Nora. 'I can't see them.'

'You can feel 'em, I s'pose,' said the woman; 'that is, if yer've got any life left in yer pore fingers. I expect you're a'most froze alive.'

'I am very cold, certainly,' said Nora.

'I thought so; and you seem to have a civil tongue in yer 'ead, which is more than the little un 'as.'

'Yes, I have,' said Snowball. 'I like you awfully. I liked poor Mr Loafer too, till he stole *all* my property and all of Nora's property.'

'Oh my!' said the woman in an excited tone. 'Yer don't mean ever now to tell me as yer was robbed, yer pore innocents?'

'Yes,' said Nora very sadly, 'we have been. We trusted a man in the fog.'

'You ought never to have done that,' said the woman, shaking her head. 'Men in fogs is 'ighly

dangerous. It's a woman you should 'ave 'ad to 'elp yer.'

'He put two shillings of ours in his mouth,' said Snowball. 'He held them in his cheek. Can you do that with money, woman?'

'Any one can do it who 'as the money to do it with,' replied the woman. 'Now, are you coming, or are you not?'

'May us?' said Snowball. 'Will you take our hands?'

'Yes,' said the woman—'yes; but come 'long. I'll take yer to wherever you want to go. You tell me where it is.'

'I haven't anything to pay you with,' said Nora. 'Every farthing I had was taken by that man. Neither my sister nor I have a penny about us.'

'That don't matter at all,' said the woman, who saw at that moment the gleam of a small gold chain round Nora's throat. 'Tell me where yer want to go, and I'll take yer. I am on my way back to my own kiddies, an' 'ungry they be, pore things! But it's I that 'ave a feeling mother's 'eart, and I wouldn't see nice little ladies like yerselves landed in a fog o' this sort—it's the worst we've 'ad for many a long year—without a-helping of 'em.'

'Do you know, by any chance,' said Nora, 'a place called Rossiter Row?'

'Do I know Rossiter Row?' exclaimed the woman. 'Rossiter Row! Why, it's there I live—

that's my 'ome. Is it to Rossiter Row you want to go, 'oney? Tell me now, and be quick.'

'No,' said Nora, who felt immensely cheered; 'but we want to go to Rossiter Terrace, just beyond Rossiter Row. We want to go to No. 7—to Madame Cerbelli's. She is expecting us. She has a dancing-class to-day, and we're to begin the shawl-dance.'

'Do you dance it?' asked Snowball.

'Beautiful!' replied the woman.

'And do you know Madame Cerbelli?' asked Nora.

'Know 'er!' said the woman. 'I's known 'er most intimate for years!'

'Then you do know exactly where she lives?'

'Could find 'er 'ouse blin'fold—fog or no fog, day or night—any time, any when.'

'Then, if you will take us there,' said Nora, 'I will ask her to give you a shilling. I am sure she will, for I can pay her back. I have more property at home,' she continued. 'Luckily, I didn't bring it all out with me, and I can pay her back to-morrow.'

'Well, we'd best be going on,' said the woman, who saw at that moment the unmistakable helmet and well-known uniform of a policeman looming in the distance. She caught both girls by their arms, placed herself between them, and plunged recklessly and—so it seemed to Nora—blindly into the darkness. Oh, was there ever such darkness—

so smarting, so cruel, so thick, coming in great waves, and getting inside your lungs, smarting your throat till you could almost scream, causing the water to pour from your eyes? Oh, oh! were she and her little sister about to be killed? Could they possibly escape that awful black shadow rushing on them?

'A motor, as I am alive!' said the woman. 'Whisht, 'oney! Stand back 'ere!'

The motor rushed by, its light faintly gleaming as it went along. A boy with a torch came up and offered to assist them across for a penny. But Nora had no penny, nor had Snowball. The woman shook her head sadly.

'Wot I 'ave I must keep for my kiddies at 'ome,' she said.

The boy vanished into the darkness to find some more profitable employment, and after what seemed an interminable time the woman told the children that they were safe. They gasped for breath, and asked her what she meant.

'Why, 'ere we are, along by the railings,' she said. 'Inside there is Kensington Gardens. Ef we walk on and on now for about fifty yards we'll come to Rossiter Row, and I'll take yer as safe as possible to Madame'—she stumbled—'wot's the name o' yer friend, 'oney?'

'Why, 'course you know her name,' said Snowball. 'You know her very well indeed, you say.'

'Course I do—'course I do—come on—come on!'

She was a little rough and a little quick, but the children were glad of the movement. At long last they were near their destination. The end could not be far off. Nora was making up her mind never, as long as she lived, to be naughty again. Snowball was ceasing to consider their adventure to be fun, glorious fun, when all of a sudden the railings seemed to stop, and the woman turned abruptly to her right.

'Follow me, follow me,' she said, and she conveyed the children down a narrow street.

This, of course, must be Rossiter Row. On the days when there was no fog it certainly did not seem to be so rough on the pavement; nor did such uncouth beings pass, some of them holding torches, some of them pressing their faces close to the children's; nor were there such angry noises of screaming women, and men calling out ugly words one to the other. But, of course, the fog altered things, and Rossiter Row was not long—of that Nora was certain; and Rossiter Terrace was a very nice place, so quiet, so—so refined; and Madame Cerbelli—— Oh, what heaven it would be when she saw Madame Cerbelli's pleasant face again!

But all of a sudden, after they had walked a very long way—Snowball began to suppose the streets in London were elastic, and stretched during a fog—the woman paused at a door. The door

stood open. She said abruptly to the two girls, 'You can come in for a minute ef yer 'ave a mind. This is my 'ouse, and I must feed my pore kiddies; they're all crying like anything for some supper. I 'as a loaf o' bread under my shawl, and a bottle with something to give 'em to drink.'

'Milk, I suppose,' said Snowball deeply interested.

'Milk it be,' said the woman. 'Wot a good child you be for guessing! Well, I'll just feed 'em, and then we'll go straight to that madame o' yourn.'

Again the woman floundered over the name, earnestly hoping that one of the children would repeat it.

'Come along upstairs,' she said; 'and be careful 'ow you manage when yer get to the third floor, for there's a 'ole *jest* on the landing, down which you might slip as lief as not; and then—why, nobody 'u'd ever need to do anything more for you.'

'Oh!' said Snowball, 'couldn't we have lights? It's so difficult to walk in the dark, woman.'

'There's no lights to be 'ad; I'll guide you when yer comes to the 'ole.'

They went stumbling up the stairs. How dark they were, and oh, how long! Were there ever children quite so tired? Were there ever children quite so miserable?

At last they reached the third landing, and then

the woman opened a door and pushed them both into a very small, untidy, very ill-smelling room.

'Here we be!' she said in a cheerful voice. 'Now I'll strike a match and put a light to the glim.'

'What's a glim?' asked Snowball.

'Candle, you may call it; I call it glim for short. I has no time for long words. I'm a wery busy woman. I think you ought to give me five shillin' ef I see you safe to Madame'——

'I'll give you five shillings if you take us safe to Madame Cerbelli's,' said Nora, who now felt certain that she was in very wrong quarters, and would gladly have done anything in the world to get out again.

'I'll take yer to Madame Cerbelli fast enough, only yer must give me time to breathe,' said the woman.

She had managed to light a candle now, which was stuck in a gingerbeer bottle. It threw a very faint light over the miserable room. The woman set it on the wooden mantelpiece, and then, going on her knees, proceeded to light a small fire with some sticks and tiny bits of coal.

'Wherever are the kiddies?' said Snowball.

'They're in the other room; they're all asleep, pore things!' said the woman. 'When you're very 'ungry you sleep. That's wot's the matter with them.'

'I'd like to see them,' said Snowball. 'Will you show them to us when they are eating their bread and drinking their nice milk? Are you going to warm their milk for them?'

'Set you down, and don't ask so many questions,' said the woman. 'I've a deal on my mind, and I can't be worrited.'

Snowball shrank up to Nora, who put her arm round the little girl's waist. The woman, having lit the fire, proceeded to boil a little water on it. When the water had well boiled, she took a cup without a handle from a cupboard in the wall, and, pouring a considerable amount of what she called milk into the bottom of the cup, put in a little boiling water.

'It's well not to *weaken* it with water,' she said, turning to the children, and then she drank off the contents, saying, when she laid down the cup, 'Now I'm better.'

'It has a funny smell,' said Snowball. 'I never knew milk like that.'

'Don't matter what you know 'bout it,' said the woman. 'Didn't ask you wot it wor; didn't ask you nothing.'

'Please, when will you feed the children?' said Snowball.

'When I've a mind, and not before.'

'Oh,' said Snowball, 'I don't think you're at all a nice sort of mother.'

'I think, perhaps,' said Nora, rising tremblingly

to her feet, 'we had best be going. There is no use waiting if you have to feed all your children. You see,' she added, speaking very politely, although she could not get the tremble out of her voice, 'the dancing class will be over at Madame Cerbelli's, and that'll be such a pity; we are so close to her now that we can easily find our way.'

'Never!' said the woman, with a theatrical attitude. 'You could as easy find your way through this fog to my dear friend Madame Cerbelli as you could fly. You must wait my leisure; I ain't ready yet. You go up close to the fire, and that'll warm yer some. Wot a pretty dress, and wot a nice little jacket you wear, missie! You wouldn't mind, now, taking yer jacket off and letting me look at it? I admire the shape like anything. Seems it'd look stylish on my eldest kid; she's about your age, and jest as pretty. You wouldn't mind me trying it on her, would you?'

'No,' said Nora, 'if you bring her in here. But then,' she added, 'perhaps I had best not take it off, for, you see, I am cold as it is, and I should be still colder without it.'

'Jest as you please,' said the woman. 'I ain't going to wake my kiddies till I 'as their supper ready for 'em. But now, little ladies, 'ow would you like a bite o' bread-and-butter and a sip out o' the old cup? You look queer, both o' you. The fog has about poisoned yer, I take it. I want

to be real kind. My name 's Hannah Deane, and every one in the place can give *me* a good word. I 'll jest give yer a sup each o' wot I ha' just drunk. It 'll make yer feel fine and warm from top to toe.'

Just then Snowball felt herself turning very faint. The room seemed to go round, and but for Nora she would have fallen. The foul, close air of the horrible room, the queer sensation of fear which was even visiting her brave little heart, were too much for her. Nora held her up, and said to the woman faintly, 'Can you give me something for my little sister? She is not well.'

The woman proceeded to mix some gin and water, which poor little Snowball took a few sips of.

'You had best have some yourself,' said the woman to Nora. 'It don't taste nice when you 're not accustomed to it, but it 's a sight better than hot milk on a night like this. Now then, here you be.'

Nora sipped in desperation. Snowball closed her eyes.

'You 're both real bad,' said Mrs Deane, looking at them compassionately. 'Now, I 'll tell yer wot I 'll do. I 'll go and call that Madame Cerbelli o' yours. She 'll come at once. There 's nothing she wouldn't do for her friend Hannah Deane. She 'll come along and help yer.'

'Oh, I wish you would! I wish you would!' said

Snowball, reviving slightly as she leaned against her sister.

Mrs Deane promised faithfully.

'Kiddies are sound asleep, and can wait,' she said. 'I'll go and call madame; she'll be round in a twinkling. Never say as I haven't a kind 'eart.'

She left the horrible room, taking care, however, to lock the door after her. The little sisters were alone. Snowball looked full up at Nora; then she burst into tears.

'I 'spect I've been awful naughty,' she said.

'I know I have been,' said Nora. 'Oh Snowball!'

They clung to each other, sobbing and trembling.

'I'll never, never do it any more,' said Snowball. 'It's worser, much, than that time when Great-uncle Michael locked me up in the dark, and Patch came and stayed with me. It's worser, much, than that.'

'It's God who has made this dark,' said Nora. 'It's the most awful, terrible dark I have ever heard of.'

'Let's ask God to make it light again,' said Snowball.

No sooner had the thought come to the poor child than she fell on her knees, clasped her hands, and looked up towards the ceiling.

'Please, God, make it light,' she said, 'and don't let no more Mr Loafers nor any more Mrs Deanes

have anything to do with us, 'cos we hasn't had any fun, and we 're *awful* miserable.'

Then she laid her head against Nora's knee, and somehow, owing to the effect of the gin-and-water, the poor little child fell fast asleep. Nora sat for a time lost in wonder, terrified almost beyond endurance. But the fire crackled in the tiny grate, and a gleam of warmth seemed to come out and comfort her. She stretched her numb hands towards it. What would she not give to be out of this awful house?

'Oh please, kind God, help us! We know we have been so naughty,' she whispered; and just at that moment there came a tap at the door.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ANGEL.

SNOWBALL was sleeping soundly, and Nora was afraid at first to attend to the very gentle tap. But when it came again she said in a low voice, 'Who 's there?'

'It 's only me—Blind Joe,' said the boy's voice.

The voice was quite clear and sweet, and Nora somehow felt that she could not be afraid of it.

'Let me in, quick,' said the boy.

'I can't,' whispered Nora, laying Snowball down on the floor, and going up to the door; 'we 're locked in.'

'You catch hold, missie, of the handle of the door, and pull the door up as strong as ever you can, and I 'll pull the handle on the other side; and when I say "Push," you push. There 's a knack about this door, and Mother Deane knows that I know. I can let yer out in a minute. We 'll raise the lock that way, missie. Now, be quick.'

Nora had never felt so intelligent in her life. Blind Joe, whoever he was, had considerable strength, and she herself felt at that moment that she possessed the power of ten ordinary men. Between them they managed to raise the miserable

door slightly off its hinges. The boy pulled, the girl pushed. The door flew open, and Blind Joe came into the room.

'I thought as much,' he said. 'There are two o' yer here. She means to rob yer o' every single bit yer possess.'

'But we haven't anything—not anything at all,' said poor Nora.

'Ain't yer got yer dresses, and maybe jewellery?' said the boy.

'I have only a gold chain and locket,' said Nora.

'Well, don't waste words; be quick.'

'She said she'd take us in for a minute because she wanted—wanted to feed her kiddies,' said Nora.

The boy laughed.

'She ain't got a single kid in the wide world,' he said. 'But come, I'll take yer 'ome, or wherever yer want to go.'

'You can't see in the fog,' said Nora.

The boy laughed cheerfully.

'Fog!' he said. 'Fog! Fog makes no differ to me. That's the good o' bein' blind. I can feel my way as sure and beautiful in the fog as out o' it, any day in the week. But now, be quick. Once she's back there ain't a hope.'

Nora bent down over Snowball.

'Come, darling,' she whispered.

The boy came straight up to where the child was lying.

'I'm big and strong,' he said. 'Give her to me in my arms and I'll carry her; don't wake her. We'll go so quick that we'll soon be out of reach of danger.'

How they went down those awful stairs, and escaped the dangerous hole, and got to the entrance of the house, and then out into the blinding, choking fog, was more than Nora ever could remember again to her dying day. But out they did get, and without Mrs Deane seeing them. Mrs Deane came back a few minutes later, to find her room door open and the two children no longer there.

It was Blind Joe again. Blind Joe was mischievous at all times. He was the bane of her life. But if on ordinary occasions he was to be feared, in a fog he was downright terrible, for then he could walk straight when other people walked crooked. Where others hesitated, he went straight on.

Poor Nora had difficulty in keeping up with him. Even Snowball, who must have been a heavy weight in his arms, did not seem to impede his progress. Blind Joe said, 'Hi, there! out o' the way. Keep yer 'orse's 'ead back, cabby!—Now then; 'ere we be!—Hi! hist! Steady, there!—Now then, missie; now we're as right as rain.'

His words were exceedingly cheerful, and once or twice he laughed delightedly to himself. In what seemed no time at all, Nora found herself back by the radiant, brightly lighted shops. There

Joe paused for a minute. Meanwhile Snowball moved in his arms, opened her eyes, saw the kind, strange face, with wide-open eyes looking down at her—eyes, alas! that could not see her—and gave a little scream.

'Oh! am I safe?' cried Snowball. 'Am I in heaven, and you are one of God's angels?'

'Yes, indeed, that he is,' said Nora.—'Put her down on the ground now, Joe; she can walk quite well.—Oh Snowball! such a wonderful thing has happened, and we're going straight back—straight back home; not to Madame Cerbelli's at all, but home to Mrs Messager and to Muriel and Patch. Oh, I don't think I will ever be naughty again!'

'Well, we're safe so far,' said Blind Joe; 'and nobody'll touch yer while I'm alongside o' yer, missies. And where do yer live? You 'aven't told me that yet.'

Nora, in some fear, mentioned Mr Messager's address. Suppose Blind Joe did not know Eaton Square! But Blind Joe assured her in a confident voice that he knew every step of London, and that, as to Eaton Square, it was, so to speak, a sort of playground of his, and what was more, they were no great way off. They would get there, he calculated, in about a quarter of an hour.

'We can't possibly get back so soon?' said Nora.

'Yes we can,' said Joe. 'And now let me say something. It's miles safer for us to walk at the foggy side of the street, because that woman

'Oh! am I safe?' cried Snow-all

Hannah Deane might try to foller us. Not that she could do much with yer alongside o' me, but we 're safest at the foggiest side.'

'And you really, really can take us quite safe home,' said Nora, 'even if we're on that black, dreadful side?'

'It's all as light as day to me, missie,' said the boy in a confident and yet pathetic voice which somehow brought fresh tears to Snowball's eyes.

'I love you like anything,' she said, taking his rough, dirty hand and kissing it. 'Somehow, I do think you are a real angel.'

The boy made no answer, but, desiring the children to keep close to him, plunged once more into the darkness. Where before they had crawled, now they very nearly ran. They steered past cabs in the most amazing manner, and avoided motors, and men and women, and great vans lumbering along, and omnibuses with their loads of terrified passengers.

At last they came to a place where there were railings. The boy told the children that they might hold on to the railings as they walked, but it didn't matter at all to him, as he knew his way beautifully; and so, by slow degrees, led by the blind boy, they did pass hitherto insuperable obstacles, and found themselves back again in Eaton Square exactly three hours and a half after they had left it. It is not too much to say that

Eaton Square itself, that home of the aristocracy and the wealthy, was lying in what might have been the Valley of the Shadow of Death, so dense was the darkness which enveloped it. But the blind boy found the right house and rang the right bell; and when the door was opened by a footman, and two little figures rushed in out of the gloom, there was such a shout from within the house, such a shout of rapture, that Snowball gave way utterly and flung herself on the floor in the brightly lighted hall, and could not even speak when Patch bent over her and touched her tenderly.

It was Nora who first came to her senses.

'Oh, where is Blind Joe?' she said. 'We'd never have got back at all but for Blind Joe. Oh, please bring him in! He has been'——

'An angel!' sobbed Snowball, as she hid her face in the door-mat.

As to Blind Joe himself, he had not gone so far off that a sharp whistle from the footman did not recall him. He came up the steps, his queer eyes blind to external things, and yet with a wonderful expression in them, staring straight before him.

'I ain't done nothing, mister,' he said. 'I am only glad the little ladies is safe.'

'Bring him in, bring him in!' said Mrs Messager. —'Joe, we owe you more than words can say. Come and sit in the hall for a minute or two.—Muriel dear, run up and tell Miss Peters.'

Joe could not be induced to *sit* in the hall, but

he stood there feeling the warmth and knowing that there was a great deal of light about him. He knew this without really comprehending it; for there was, in a marvellous way, a wonderful inner light always round Joe's soul, so that darkness was no darkness to him, and night and day were alike.

Miss Peters came down. She looked quite weak from all the tears she had shed, and Mrs Messager took Nora's hand.

'Miss Peters,' said Mrs Messager, 'will you take Snowball to her room and see that she has a hot bath and is put straight into bed?—No, my dear children, I am not angry. We won't talk about anything to-night except the goodness of God in having brought you back. He sent Joe, this poor fellow, to save you.—Nora dear, come with me.'

'Mrs Messager,' whispered Nora, 'you will do something for Blind Joe? You won't let him go back to that awful house?'

'I could not hear of it,' said Mrs Messager.—'Joe, you brought the children back, and we have no words to thank you. I don't know their story yet, but I know that I can trust you. Now, Henry, my servant, will take you down to the kitchen and give you something warm to eat and drink, and afterwards I will talk to you.'

Joe mumbled something. He felt sheepish and almost afraid in this grand house; but he owned that he was hungry, and his blindness prevented

his feeling half as awkward as a boy of his own rank might have felt who could see.

'When Mr Messager comes in he will talk to you, Joe,' said kind Mrs Messager.—'Now, Nora, come with me.'

Nora was almost past words, she was so tired, so dazed, so ill, and so sorry.

'I can't speak of it,' she said. 'Only for Joe'—— But then she covered her face and trembled.

'We won't question her now, Muriel,' said Mrs Messager; 'she also must go to bed. Oh, my poor darling! your clothes are all wringing wet, for this fog is so shockingly damp; and, oh, how icy cold your hands are! Well, go now to bed, and in the morning I hope you will be better.—Muriel, take her upstairs, dearest.'

On the way up Muriel told Nora that they had all been nearly wild with anxiety, and that her father had gone to two or three of the nearest police stations to send out search-parties for missing children.

'I hope father will soon be in,' said Muriel. 'I never saw him look so distracted. Oh, we have all suffered!'

'I understand at last,' said Nora in a very weak voice, 'what it is to be downright wicked. I—I can't talk of it. I am dazed.'

CHAPTER XVII.

BLIND JOE.

EVERYTHING was done that could be done for the two children. They had hot baths, and were put into nice, warm, white beds, and a bright fire dispersed some of the darkness of the room. The electric light burned cheerfully, and, with the curtains drawn and the fire blazing so merrily, it seemed to Snowball at least that the fog must have gone.

But Nora knew better. For some reason which she could not understand, the terrible London fog had penetrated right down into her soul. She saw herself for the first time as she really was—a naughty, wild, selfish child; one who had no consideration for others, who lived for herself and her own pleasures alone. She had learned a very sharp lesson, and the full sharpness of it was not yet over. Whether it would be a lifelong lesson or not remained to be proved; for it is exceedingly difficult by one sharp blow to alter the character, and the best of us can only fight against our weak and selfish impulses, and fight on to the very end.

'Does the road wind uphill all the way? Yes; to the very end.'

This poor Nora and Snowball were to prove,

during many years of discipline and joy, of brightness and of sorrow, of dark days and sunshiny days. But it is quite true that Nora's eyes were opened at last, and for the first time, to her true character.

After a night of great restlessness and suffering, the poor child was so ill in the morning that the doctor had to be summoned. He said at once that Nora had taken a most severe cold, and must not rise from her bed. He also ordered Snowball to have her bed moved into another room. The little girl did not like it, but the doctor would not hear of any rebellion on her part.

'It is to be done,' he said, 'and you are to say nothing more about it.'

Snowball looked full at Nora, who was lying, with highly flushed cheeks and very bright eyes, on her pillow. She went up to her sister and spoke to her.

'Does you want me to go away into another room all by my lonesome?' she said.

Nora looked fixedly at her, and said, 'It's the next turning that's Rossiter Row, and then we get into Rossiter Terrace, and Madame Cerbelli's house is No. 7. Do you hear? It's No. 7. If you know her so well, you can't mistake her house.'

'Oh dear! oh dear!' said Snowball. 'How very queerly Nora speaks!'

She looked with fright at Mrs Messager, who took her hand and led her gently out of the room.

'Your sister is very ill, Snowball,' she said. 'You ought to be thankful, my darling, that you have so far escaped.'

'I did have a pain in my middle yesterday,' said Snowball; 'but it's gone now.' Then she added, looking full at Mrs Messager, 'I am ever so sorry I was naughty.'

'That is right, Snowball; I will come up to the schoolroom presently and have a chat with you. Meanwhile, wouldn't you like to go and see Blind Joe?'

'Oh! oh!' said Snowball, 'yes, that I would.'

'I will send him up to the schoolroom, and you can all have a chat with him.'

Snowball was so excited about this that she forgot her anxiety about her sister, and immediately rushed off to the schoolroom, where she found the other children assembled; Patch looking very sad and with red rims round her eyes, and Muriel quietly reading a book in a distant corner.

'Here I be,' said Snowball, 'as well as ever. I'm as well as possible; it takes a deal to knock *me* down. I 'spect it's 'cause I'm built so square. I am awful sorry for what happened yesterday; but I'm glad I'm back. Now, do let's have some fun. When you're sorry and you say it, and you're forgived, there's an end of it, isn't there? Why does you all look so long-faced? Whatever's the matter?'

'It's only that Nora is very ill,' said Muriel.

'Oh—Nora!' exclaimed Snowball. 'She'll be all right by-and-by. She's talking an awful lot of nonsense. She thinks she's in Rossiter Row. Poor Nora! she wants to get to Madame Cerbelli's. Does sound so queer to hear her!'

'That's because she's very ill,' said Muriel. 'You must be sorry for her, Snowball.'

She called the little girl to her side.

'Come and sit on my lap and tell me about yesterday,' she said.

Snowball nestled close up to Muriel.

'You look awful nice and cosy,' she said; 'and I am so glad there isn't a fog to-day.'

She looked out of the schoolroom window. A watery sun was shining in the sky, and the trees of the square were moving their branches.

'That's right, old trees,' said Snowball, looking at them; 'you are pushing the fog away. I'm really glad to see you.—Oh Muriel! I must tell you something. I know it will hurt you, but I must say it.'

'What is it?' said Muriel.

'I am not the only one who ought to be sorry to-day. Your father ought to be in an awful state of—whatever you call it—repenting of himself. Do you know—that—he told a lie yesterday?'

'He didn't!' said Patch. 'I wish,' she continued, 'that Jackdaw was here to listen to you.'

'It makes no differ,' said Snowball in her ex-

ceedingly confident voice, 'who's here or who isn't; your father told a big—whopping—*lie*. He said at lunch—'cos I heard him—that you could cut the fog with a knife. Well, do you know, when Nora and me went out into it, I took my penknife with me, and slashed everywhere; but not a bit—no, not a bit of cutting could I do, 'cept nearly cutting off the nose of a girl. Your father told a lie! He can't be angry with me, anyway, 'cos he was just as bad hisself.'

'Oh, you silly Snowball!' said Muriel. 'That is just an expression—a figure of speech.'

'Whatever's that?' said Snowball.

'It means that the fog is very thick; it doesn't mean that you could really cut it.'

'Then peoples ought to say what they really mean,' said Snowball. 'He did tell lies, whether you like to own up to it or not.'

Just at that moment, and just before the controversy on the subject of Mr Messager's ill-conduct had come to serious issues, there came a soft tap at the door. Snowball sprang to her feet and listened attentively. Muriel said, 'Come in,' and the blind boy entered. If the blind boy in all his dirt and rags of yesterday had looked different from other people — above other people, so to speak — the change which respectable clothes, and a warm bath, and a good brush-up, as well as excellent food, had made in his appearance is really difficult to describe. Blind Joe was quite one of the most extra-

ordinary-looking young people that the Messagers or Snowball had ever seen. He had a very gentle, refined voice; and, although he was quite blind, he was tall for his age and well made. His face was very pale, but his features were regular; and those large, brown, absolutely sightless eyes of his gave him a strange, unearthly look. He came gently into the room, not hesitating for a moment, and, feeling for a chair, laid his hand on it.

'Is Missie Snowball here?' he said after a pause. 'Henry told me to come up.'

'Yes, Joe,' said Muriel: 'Snowball is here, and so am I. My name is Muriel Messager, and my sister is in the room too; her name is Alice Messager'——

'Mostly called Patch,' interrupted Snowball.

'We are so glad to see you,' continued Muriel. 'Please sit down.'

Joe immediately seated himself, and sat with his hands on his knees, looking straight towards the window.

'It 's wery beautiful, missies three,' he said.

'How do you know?' said Muriel in a tone of surprise.

Joe just touched his forehead. 'Feel it all over me,' he said after a pause.

'Did you feel the fog yesterday?' asked Muriel.

'Yes, miss,' replied Joe; 'but the fog didn't hurt me. Nothin' hurts Blind Joe.'

Snowball at this moment made a sort of howling

noise. She rushed across the room, flung her arms tightly round Joe, and began to kiss him several times on his cheek.

'I love you! You're an angel!' she said. 'May I sit on your knee?'

'Yes, missie.'

Snowball ensconced herself there, and proceeded to stroke Joe's face with her little, podgy, fat hand.

'Nice boy!' she said. 'Very nice boy! You'll stay with us always and always now, Joe.'

'Dunno nothin' about that, miss,' answered Joe. 'I 'as to go back, I 'spec', to Petticoat Lane.'

'Wherever's Petticoat Lane?' asked Snowball.

'Where I found you, missie, and the other missie, yesterday.'

'Why, we was in Rossiter Row!' said Snowball.

'No, missie, you were not. Mrs Deane lives in Petticoat Lane. You were not anywhere near Rossiter Row.'

Snowball's eyes grew black with horror. She glanced across the room at the two other girls. Then she kissed Joe again. The expression of distress faded from her face, and she said happily, 'It's all right now—now that you've founded us.'

'And a good thing I did,' said Joe. 'Mother Deane ain't the person for poor lost kiddies. She'd 'ave stolen all you 'ad. But never mind; as you say, you're safe now.'

'Tell us about yourself, Joe,' said Muriel, who saw that this conversation was almost too exciting for Snowball.

Joe, in a very modest way, repeated his small history. He had not a great deal to tell. As long as he could remember anything, he had lived in Petticoat Lane. He had neither father nor mother, brother nor sister. He belonged to nobody, and nobody belonged to him. The other children in the Lane were kind to him, and on foggy days he earned a good many pennies leading people about. But on sunshiny days matters did not progress so well with him, and he was often hungry.

'Not that I mind,' said Blind Joe; 'for you can allers tighten your belt when you're hungry, and then the pain inside don't si'nify.'

'Tighten your belt! Can you?' said Snowball, immensely interested. 'Does that crush up your little inside so that you don't feel no room for anything?'

''Spect so, missie.'

'I'll try it 'stead of dinner to-day,' said Snowball.—'Have you got a real tight belt you could lend me, Muriel?'

'No, I haven't,' said Muriel in a rather sharp tone; 'and you know perfectly well, Snowball, you have promised to be good, and not to annoy any one again by your naughtiness. It would be very naughty of you indeed to tighten your belt.'

'Very well,' said Snowball in a resigned voice.

'It sounds exciting, all the same; but I won't try it to-day—not if it vexes you, Muriel.'

'It does vex me just awfully.'

Blind Joe went on talking.

'It ain't at all good to tighten your belt,' he said; 'it's much better to eat. When I've a good meal I feel sort o' 'appy; but when I 'as no meal at all, all day long, and I lies down at night, I am 'appy too.'

'With your belt tightened up?' said Snowball.

'No, missie; I don't do that always.'

'Then why can you be happy?'

'Dreams, missie,' said Blind Joe. 'It's wunnerful what dreams you 'as when you ain't eat nothin' for a whole livelong day; you're sort o' fallin' away and away, and you hear music. Once,' continued Blind Joe, a very shining light coming into his blind eyes, 'I went outside a great big church, and I heard folks singin'—multitudes of 'em—and I heard a great noise o' music. There was a gel that come along with me, and she said the church was called St Paul's Cathedral, and that the music was made by an organ, and there were lots o' boys all dressed in white—and men too—singin' that lovely music. She was a very nice gel. Her name was Agnes. She lived in the 'ouse next to me in Petticoat Lane. And after that we used to go every Sunday afternoon to listen to the music. She could see, and even read a bit; and she read me once a bit out o' a book, and it said that the

music was like the sound o' many waters. That sort o' sound comes into my 'ead when I don't eat anythin' for the whole livelong day.'

'But why didn't you go right into the church?' said Muriel, coming close up to Joe in her deep interest, and taking one of his hands.

'I couldn't, missie; I was all in rags. I was barefooted, too; I didn't dare.'

'But couldn't the little girl go in?'

'Agnes?' said Blind Joe. 'No; she was worse nor me. We neither of us dared; but we stood outside, just where the police couldn't see us, and we listened.'

'Well?' said Muriel.

'That's a good bit ago, missie.'

'Then you don't go—lately?'

'No,' said Blind Joe, a shadow coming over his placid face. 'Agnes ain't here any more; and, somehow, I couldn't go by my lone self.'

'But where is Agnes?' asked Patch.

'Dunno, missie. Mother Deane says she's dead, and they ha' put her in the ground somewhere; but I don't believe that for a minute, 'cause I spoke to her the very night afore she were put away, and she said she was goin' to the country where the music was. I don't like to talk about Agnes, missie, of you don't mind very much.'

'Of course we don't,' said Muriel.

Patch and Snowball were silent. After a minute Snowball began to feel Joe's left cheek.

'Did you ever put half-crowns in there?' she asked.

'No, missie, that I didn't. I never 'ad any 'alf-crowns to put.'

'But could you if you had one?'

'I sartain sure could, miss.'

Snowball considered for a minute; then she slipped very softly from the room. No one observed her going, for the other children were too much interested in Blind Joe. Snowball went straight to her old room. It was wonderfully changed. Her little bed had been removed altogether, and in its place was a long sofa where some one could lie down if necessary; but it was certainly not a proper bed, according to Snowball's ideas. Nora's own bed had been moved out more into the centre of the room; and Nora was talking all the time in a low, rambling sort of voice.

'She isn't ill—not she,' thought Snowball.

She went up to her sister and bent over her.

'Nora, may I take half-a-crown from your property to put into Blind Joe's cheek?'

Nora looked round, said 'Yes' in a confused way, and then added, 'I don't believe I can do that shawl-dance; it makes my head so giddy.'

Snowball was not the least interested in the shawl-dance now. She went to Nora's drawer, selected half-a-crown from a pile of money which lay in one corner, and carried it triumphantly from

the room. She was not a minute too soon, for just as she reached the door a strange person entered—a person with a dark dress and a nurse's apron and cap. This person said severely to Snowball that she was not to come into the room any more without leave. Snowball made a face at her, said in a defiant voice, 'Does you keep shillings in your cheek?' and rushed down the passage.

In a minute she had regained the schoolroom. She flung herself on Blind Joe, and said, 'Put it in! put it in!'

'What do you mean? What are you doing now, Snowball?' said Patch.

'It's half-a-crown for his cheek, poor fellow!' said Snowball. 'Mr Loafer had two shillings in his cheek yesterday; but half-a-crown's better.—Now then, Blind Joe'——

'Oh, missie!' said Blind Joe.

'Do it—do it! I want to see how it looks!' said Snowball.

Blind Joe smiled very placidly.

'I've often put pennies and 'alfpennies in my cheek,' he said; 'but this'——

'It's for you,' said Snowball in great excitement. 'Nora sent it to you.'

To the intense interest and surprise of the other two girls, the half-crown was slipped into Joe's cheek. Snowball felt it there from the outside with intense satisfaction.

'Now, move it,' she said.

Joe did so.

'Now, speak,' commanded Snowball.

Joe spoke very nearly as comfortably as though he had not this encumbrance in his mouth.

Snowball clapped her hands.

'No more purses for me!' she said. 'I've got one that won't wear out.—Thanks so much, Blind Joe!'

But Snowball's spirits (which were those of a very ignorant little child) were not shared by any one else of the party, for Nora's very serious illness prevented all mirth on the part of the others. Blind Joe was sent downstairs presently, and Mrs Messager came up. She took Snowball immediately in her arms, and kissed her a great many times.

'Do you know,' she said, 'that I have just sent a telegram to Great-uncle Michael?'

'What's a telegram?' asked Snowball.

'A message which will reach him very fast, and which, I think, will bring him back to town.'

'*I* don't want him,' said Snowball.

'That is not the question, darling. Under the circumstances, my husband and I would like him to be close at hand. Dear Nora is very ill indeed.'

Snowball looked round full at the lady. Her black eyes grew bigger than ever. Her lips drooped at the corners. She slid off Mrs Messager's lap and cuddled down on the floor. Patch went up and touched her.

'Don't!' said Snowball. 'I don't want to cry, and I don't believe a single word that you are all saying. Nora's quite well; she spoke to me just now. She's as jolly as possible; she only wants to get up.'

'She can't get up,' said Mrs Messager. 'The doctor says so, and he ought to know.'

'Won't you turn that horrid woman with the cap and the white apron out of her room?' said Snowball.

'She's the nurse who is going to look after her.'

'I'll look after her,' said Snowball.

'No, dear, you couldn't do that. I am very sorry, but what I say is the truth; your sister is dangerously ill.'

Snowball sat quiet and thoughtful. Mrs Messager, after a time, changed the subject.

'Girls,' she said, 'I want to talk to you about Joe. I have been asking him a few questions. He seems to be a wonderfully nice boy. He certainly did us a service yesterday when he brought Nora and Snowball back again; and I have made up my mind not to let him go back to that awful place Petticoat Lane.'

'Oh dear!' said Snowball in great excitement; 'I is glad! You are going to keep him always, then? He'll be able to take us out in fogs and do all sorts of useful things.'

'We are going to keep him here for a few days,' said Mrs Messager; 'and afterwards I hope we

may get him into a school for the blind, where he will be trained to earn his own living. Henry and the other servants are very kind to him, and you children can see him now and then.'

'I love him like anything,' said Snowball. 'I'd like to sit on his knee and kiss him. Do you know that he can keep half-a-crown in his cheek, and talk just as well as though he hadn't got it?'

'Snowball darling,' said Mrs Messager, 'I want you to promise me something.'

'What's that?' asked the little girl.

'You won't go into Nora's room unless I take you there myself?'

Snowball shook her head.

'I can't make that promise,' she said, ''cos I wouldn't *dream* of keeping it.'

'But, Snowball,' said Mrs Messager in some distress, 'I thought you promised not to be naughty again.'

'I oughtn't to have done it,' said Snowball, ''cos I feel the naughtiness a-bubbling back inside o' me.'

'Well, dear, you must choose. If you are determined—quite determined—to go to Nora notwithstanding my orders not to do so, I shall have to remove you from the house. My sister Mrs Ainslie would take you, I know, for a week or so. I can only keep you here on condition that you are very good and quiet, and stay with Patch and Muriel all the time.'

'Oh, I can't go away! I'll promise—I will!' said poor Snowball.

She began to cry very hard now, and Mrs Messager petted her and held the little girl tight in her arms. She could not forget her terrible fright of the day before when she had discovered that the two children were lost. She could not treasure Snowball enough. But for Blind Joe she might never have seen the child again.

Some days went by, and, alas! poor Nora grew worse, not better. She was suffering from a very serious attack of pneumonia, which is one of the most dangerous diseases any one can have. She had caught a terrible cold in her chest standing about in the bitter fog, and now both her lungs were attacked, and the whole house was quiet and still and full of sorrow on her account.

It was not a bit like Christmas—for Christmas was coming on day by day. The boys were not allowed to come back on Saturday evening, and Snowball began to be very listless and unhappy. If she could have talked to Dandy she might have borne things better.

On the fourth day of Nora's illness, when a lot of straw had been put down in the street (which interested Snowball immensely, although she could not make out what it was done for), a cab drew up outside the house, and a tall man got out.

'Great-uncle Michael!' whispered Snowball.

At another time she would have shouted the

name. There was no one in the schoolroom, and in her usual headlong fashion she tumbled downstairs; there is no other possible way to explain her progress. She seemed to leap from stair to stair as though she were flying; and once or twice she tripped, but she rose again like lightning and flew on. So fast did she go that, although the schoolroom was on the third story, she was standing in the hall, her figure well squared, her black hair standing up in a mop, her legs apart, when Great-uncle Michael entered.

'Good gracious!' he exclaimed when he saw her. 'There you are—the same as ever!'

'More monstrous naughty, that's all,' said Snowball; and she went up to Great-uncle Michael, took his hand, and patted it. 'So you's come back. Nora's not ill; they make an awful fuss about her. 'Spect she just misses me. Come into one of the rooms, and I'll tell Mrs Messager.'

Henry the footman stood by, waiting for his turn to speak.

'We are expecting you, sir,' he said; 'and there's a room ready for you. Would you like your luggage conveyed to it at once? And will you see my mistress in the drawing-room?'

'I'll see your mistress wherever she likes to see me,' was Great-uncle Michael's response. 'But my luggage is at a hotel, thanks. Please announce me: Mr Darrell.—Now, Snowball, go away; go away, child! Don't cling on to my coat-tails.'

But Snowball was irrepressible.

'Where Great-uncle Michael is, there's Snowball,' she said. 'Don't frown so hard, Uncle Michael. 'Tisn't me that's ill, you know; I am as well as possible, but more desperate naughty even than I was. I think my naughtiness must be cut out of me; I don't think it'll go any other way.'

'A sharp cane will do wonders,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'Hey, miss! what are you saying now?' for Snowball had darted in front of him and held out her hand.

'Do it!' she said. 'Do it! A cane cuts when you slash well with it. I know I am naughty, and I—somehow I can't be good.'

Uncle Michael pushed the little extended hand aside.

'I will speak to you presently. I want to see Mrs Messager now.'

The next minute he had entered the drawing-room, and Snowball found the door slammed in her face.

'Don't go in, missie,' said Henry. 'You'll anger the old gentleman like anything.'

'Henry, have you got a cane,' said Snowball, 'a long cane that whizzes through the air, and then comes down—smack—on your hand? It cuts when it comes down like that. That's what would cut out my naughtiness; don't you think so, Henry—really, truly?'

'No, miss; I couldn't say so. Will you please

go back to the schoolroom, miss? I haven't got no cane.'

Snowball gave him a withering glance.

'*You're* not up to much,' she said.

She sank down on the mat outside the drawing-room door, and, resting her head against the door, indulged in a few tears.

'I am naughty!' she thought. 'Nothing seems to cure me. Sometimes I wish I wasn't so bad; but the worst of all is that most times I wish I was. That's what makes it so horrible hard. 'Spect Great-uncle Michael had better take me back to the Moat House. 'Spect he will. Oh dear, oh dear! Don't know what to do with myself, I am so awful wicked!'

While Snowball was bewailing her depravity, Great-uncle Michael was talking to Mrs Messager.

'I was obliged to send for you,' she said.

'I supposed it was something urgent,' he remarked, 'or you wouldn't have wired.'

'It was very urgent,' she said gently. Then she related the story of the children's adventure in the fog.

'Just like them,' he said. 'They never were like others.'

'Dandy and Roger are getting on very well at school,' she remarked.

'Oh, they're boys,' he said. 'There's hope for a boy, but none for a girl.'

'I don't agree with you at all. I think that

Snowball and Nora will be very fine characters yet.'

'Well, madam, you haven't managed to make much of them. Snowball is just as impossible as ever.'

'Poor little thing!' said Mrs Messager very gently, 'she doesn't know what to make of herself. She is fighting hard with herself, and hasn't got the victory yet. But, please, don't let us talk of her now. It is poor Nora I am really anxious about. She is very, very ill.'

'Double pneumonia, you say?'

'Yes. We have two or three doctors and two nurses; they think the crisis will come to-night. I am glad you are near, Mr Darrell; for, after all, Nora is your niece.'

'My niece once removed, madam; my great-niece.'

'Poor, sweet, pretty creature!' said Mrs Messager. 'It makes my very heart ache to look at her. Yes, she is very, very ill; but we pray to God to restore her.'

Mr Darrell was silent for a minute.

'I have taken a room at the "Grosvenor,"' he said then, 'and will go there presently. Of course, I shall be within call if necessary.'

'Would you like to see one of the doctors? I think there is one upstairs with Nora now.'

'No, thank you,' said Great-uncle Michael. 'I hate medical men.'

'Well,' said Mrs Messager, 'to-night will, in all probability, decide whether Nora recovers or—dies. Her life is in grave danger, but in a complaint like hers there is always a crisis; she will come out on the side of life or death.'

Mr Darrell looked intensely uncomfortable. After a minute he said, 'I didn't know it was so bad as that. But I won't go to see the poor child; I'd only frighten her. Of course, if she asks for me by any chance, I will be within call.'

'I thought perhaps,' said Mrs Messager, 'you would like a bedroom in this house.'

'Couldn't stand it, madam — not with my youngest great-niece about. That small child gets on my nerves.' He walked to the window. He looked taller and darker and thinner than ever. 'I have left the sunshine and blue skies—in fact, summer—to come here at your request,' he said. 'What a horrible climate you have in the winter, to be sure!'

'You were lucky not to have a black London fog,' said Mrs Messager.

'I expect so. Well, if I can't do anything, I'll go off to the hotel. I have travelled night and day since I got your telegram.'

'You'll stay and have some lunch and see my husband?'

'No, thanks; I couldn't eat—that child would be about. The fact is, Mrs Messager, you are the

best woman I know; but you have not effected much of a reform in my two great-nieces.'

'You can't expect characters to change in the course of a few weeks or months,' said Mrs Messager. Then she added suddenly, 'Oh, Mr Darrell, if Nora gets well, give them to me altogether, to bring up as my own! Believe me, I do not despair of either; they will be credits to you yet.'

'I am sure, madam,' said Mr Darrell, 'you're about the best woman I know. No one else would be bothered with such handfuls.'

'You seem to forget,' said Mrs Messager a little severely, 'that they have souls that can never die, and that we do not try to train those who are committed to our care only for time. Poor, dear little Nora, how severely she has been punished! My heart aches for her.'

Mr Darrell did not seem to know what to reply; so, after a minute's pause, he bade his hostess good-bye and went to the door. There a very unpleasant thing happened, for he stumbled over Snowball, almost losing his balance, and absolutely losing his temper.

'You atrocious, you terrible child!' he said, 'how dare you sit on the mat like this?—She has been eavesdropping, madam! So much for *your* training!'

'I was asleep,' said Snowball, rubbing her eyes. 'I didn't hear a single word. I wish to goodness I had; I'd have liked nothing better.'

'She has been eavesdropping, madam!'

S. F. PAGE 246.

'You're an incorrigible little spitfire!' said her uncle. 'Well, I am going; good-bye, good-bye.'

'Going, are you?' said Snowball, scrambling to her feet, rushing to him, and flinging her stout detaining arms round his knees. 'You are leaving this house?'

'Yes.'

'Take me with you.'

'Never!'

'I want to scream so awfully,' said Snowball. 'If I could get into another house with you I'd do it. I daren't do it here on account of poor Nora. I 'spect she's pretty bad, for peoples can't tell lies about her all day long.'

'Let me go this minute!' said Great-uncle Michael.

'No,' answered Snowball; 'not till you promise me something.'

She clung more tightly than ever. Mrs Messager spoke—all in vain. Snowball was desperate.

'It must be cut out,' she said. 'You must do it on my hand; you must do it on both my hands. You must bring a cane; you must slap me well, with a big, fizzing noise. You must do it—you must do it to-day. You can bring it on an affy-david.—Mrs Messager, is an affy-david big or small? Would it hold a long cane?'

'The child's mad,' said Great-uncle Michael.

'I am not!' said Snowball. 'I met a man called Mr Loafer, and he said he'd bring me some change

on an affy-david. I have been dying to see one ever since, so you might bring your cane on one. I want to have my wickedness cut out, so bring back the cane when you come along.'

A grim look came over Great-uncle Michael's face. Snowball relaxed her hands. Uncle Michael fled downstairs as though he were pursued. A minute later he was out in the street, and had entered the hansom which was waiting for him.

'Really,' he said to himself, 'that child must be queer. I am sorry poor Nora is so ill; but that child Snowball gets worse and worse. She'll have a good caning, bigger than she bargained for, if she annoys me much more.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLACK EYES.

THERE was a great stillness in the big house in Eaton Square—a sort of stillness that might be felt. People did not dare to speak too loud. The servants went about with muffled footsteps. The children, huddled together in the distant schoolroom, only spoke in low whispers. Even Snowball was subdued. Her little round face did not look so round as usual. There were blotches and patches on that face, for she had been crying hard. She could not quite make out why she had been crying. Everything was exceedingly confusing to her. She had not the least idea what was the matter with the house. Even Patch, her chosen friend of the Moat House days, had ceased altogether to comfort her; for Patch understood what Snowball could not possibly understand—that Nora was very ill indeed.

Nora was so dreadfully ill that two doctors meant to stay in the house all night, and there were two nurses, and no one dared to think what might take place between now and the morrow. Patch understood vaguely; for once—oh, a long time ago—a little, little baby-brother of hers had been ill like that, and every one spoke in whispers, and

doctors came and went, but nurses stayed; and then—then—there was a profound hush, and people told Patch that her little brother was an angel now; he was in heaven.

So Patch understood a wee bit what was very likely to happen to Nora. Muriel, of course, understood quite well. She knew that Nora's life hung in the balance; that by this time to-morrow, or even this time to-morrow morning, there might be no Nora—that bright, piquant face, those keen blue eyes, that gay manner, would have ceased to exist as far as this world was concerned. It was poor little Snowball, however, who was the most miserable, because she could not understand a bit. Death meant nothing to her. She had never touched it or seen it; she had never approached it. It was true that in the big garden at home she had sometimes seen a dead bird or a dead mouse; but this—this was altogether beyond her comprehension. It was all in vain that Muriel spoke gently to her, and that Patch had sat close to her side and put her arm round the little girl's waist, and whispered to her that she would always be her sister.

Mrs Messager had not come near the schoolroom for some time; and as to Miss Peters, she had been crying so much that she was obliged to retire to her own bedroom. Great-uncle Michael arrived in the middle of the evening, and then Snowball did rouse herself. She rushed downstairs to meet him, and asked him in a woebegone voice if he had brought

the cane. He pushed her aside without a word, and she was so absolutely crushed that she did not resist. Great-uncle Michael went into a room with Mrs Messager, and the door was shut behind them both, and Snowball was left standing in the passage. Then she crept back to the schoolroom.

'It's all no use,' she said; 'he won't cut it out.'

'What?' asked Patch, looking up.

'Never mind,' said Snowball.

'Come and sit close to me, Snowball darling,' said Patch, 'and let me put my arm round you. I want to be your real, real sister.'

'Wish you wouldn't tell lies,' said Snowball. 'You can't be my sister, and I don't want your arm round me. It's sort of tight, and I don't want to be squoze up to any one; I'd rather be free.'

She shook her shoulders and sat quite apart, wondering why her heart beat so fast, and why there was something in the house—something indefinable, strange, terrible—much, much worse than the London fog.

All of a sudden she came to a resolution. Muriel was unendurable; Patch was no longer her chosen friend; but there was a person in the house with whom she might converse—a person who might do her good, who might help her to understand herself. This person could keep half-crowns in his cheek. This person could walk straight through

this fog—this fog of misery inside the house, and bring Snowball into the light which certainly must be shining beyond.

Now, it so happened that during the last few days Snowball had been rather troublesome with regard to Blind Joe. She had invited him up to the schoolroom on all sorts of occasions; had insisted on his turning somersaults, which she herself proceeded to imitate; and had asked him numbers of questions, sometimes shouting with laughter at his replies. In consequence of Snowball's conduct, and by no means because of Blind Joe himself, it was decided that he was not to come to the schoolroom just then, and that Snowball was to have nothing to do with him. Mrs Messager told her this, and so also did Miss Peters. They tried to extract a promise from her that she would have nothing to do with Blind Joe. But Snowball was in no mood to utter promises; and now, as the thought of the blind boy flashed through her mind, she was exceedingly glad that she had made none. She got up softly, rose to her feet, and went towards the door.

'Where are you going, Snowball?' said Muriel.

Snowball made no reply, but closed the door after her just as though it were made of velvet.

'I expect she's feeling all this frightfully,' said Patch. 'Poor, poor little thing! I wish I could do something for her.'

'It 's very difficult to understand Snowball,' was Muriel's remark.

'Oh no, I don't think so,' said Patch. 'I used to understand her quite well. She 's frightfully sorry, and she doesn't know that she 's sorry; and she 's awfully frightened, and she doesn't know that she 's frightened. That is what 's the matter with her. But,' continued Patch, sighing deeply, 'I do wish Jackdaw were here. He and I between us could do something to comfort Snowball.'

Muriel made no answer.

'Muriel,' said Patch in a subdued voice, 'do you think Nora will die?'

'I don't know,' said Muriel; 'the doctors say she is very, very ill.'

Patch crept up to Muriel and hid her face in her sister's skirt. Muriel laid her hand on Patch's head, and the two little sisters sat still. They were both praying for Nora, although they uttered no word aloud.

Meanwhile, Snowball, always swift in action, never retarded by difficulties, made her way boldly and rapidly to the kitchen regions. There were the back-stairs down which she and Nora had gone on that dreadful day when they lost themselves in the fog. The family would never expect one of the children to use the back-stairs, and this fact was, Snowball considered, her great safety. By-and-by she found herself in the big underground kitchen.

The cook's name was Mrs Phelps. She was a very stout, red-faced woman, with the most good-natured heart in the world. Like all the servants, she was deeply excited at the tragedy which was going on upstairs, and as she moved backwards and forwards, and gave directions to Jessie the kitchen-maid, she said, 'Eh dear!' and 'Oh my!' and 'Well, I never!' from time to time.

'What funny words you is using!' said Snowball, coming boldly into the kitchen and taking up her square attitude.

Mrs Phelps lifted her brawny hands and arms out of a great basin of flour. She stared hard at Snowball.

'You mustn't come in here, missie,' she said in a gentle voice.

The child looked so queer and sad and strange, as she said afterwards to the other servants, that she had no heart to be rough with her.

'You must go back, indeed, missie,' she continued.

'No, I can't go,' said Snowball, coming up to the woman, and looking with immense interest at her floury hands and arms. 'I want to find Blind Joe. I has nothing to do with schoolroom folks; they don't interest me, and I don't interest them. How wonderful the flour looks on your arms! May I touch it?'

Before Mrs Phelps could remonstrate, Snowball had laid her fat finger on the big arm. The flour came off at once and made a little mark.

'I could write my name on your arm,' she said with a delighted laugh. 'Wouldn't it be fun? What a nice place you have, and what a big, big fire! And, oh! what are you making?'

'I am making a meat-pie for dinner, missie.'

'Meat-pie!' said Snowball. 'That sounds good. However does you do it?'

'I'll tell you another time, my dear little lady. You must go away now.'

But Snowball did not move. Instead of that, she laid her fat elbows on the table, pressed her hands to her round cheeks, and stared hard at Mrs Phelps.

'Never did I see such black eyes,' remarked the cook.

'Is you talking about my eyes?' asked Snowball.

'Yes, missie.'

'It's 'cause of wickedness they's so black,' said Snowball.

'Oh, nonsense! my dear little lady. Black eyes are very 'andsome.—Don't you think so, Jessie?'

'*Hi* admires them more than anything,' whispered Jessie, looking with considerable awe at Snowball.

'You couldn't have 'em unless you was wicked,' said Snowball. 'No one does. Go on making your pie; I want to watch.'

'You're not allowed in 'ere, miss.'

'Black eyes can't help coming in. Black eyes is awful wicked,' said Snowball.

'You must go, really, missie.'

'If you touch me I'll scream like anything,' said Snowball.

This was a terrible problem, and cook looked with dismay at Jessie. After a time she bent towards the girl and said something to her in a whisper. Snowball did not mind this in the least. She was determined to remain in the kitchen. The kitchen was very lively and interesting compared to the great desolate schoolroom upstairs. There was noise in the kitchen—not much, but a little—and a huge fire and a lovely smell of all sorts of good things being cooked.

Snowball put her hand to the middle region of her body.

'I feel,' she said—'I feel as if—— Did you ever have a pain in your middle, cook?'

'My word!' said cook, 'I suppose every one has had that sort of pain, missie.'

'I has,' said Snowball. 'When I smell the lovely things here my little inside wants filling. Have you anything you could give me to put into it?'

'I'll give you a cake if you'll go away,' said cook.

But she had hardly said the words before the door was opened, and in came Jessie, leading Blind Joe by the hand.

Blind Joe's face was just as pale as ever, and his queer eyes just as luminous. He came straight up to Snowball and took her hand.

'Do you want me?' he said.

'Oh yes,' said Snowball.

'Then come,' said Blind Joe, still holding her hand.

He led her out of the kitchen, and they found themselves in a little room just beyond. Blind Joe walked straight through this room and then into another wee room, which had electric light and was neatly furnished. There were rows of books in an old-fashioned bookcase by the wall, and there was a table in the centre of the room, and on the table lay a very big book.

'Sit down, Blind Joe,' said Snowball. 'I came down to look for you. I found cook, and she's awful interesting with the flour on her arms and hands, and the wonderful way she can make things, and the 'licious smells that come from the things she makes. But I want you more. May I stay alongside of you, Joe, and will you talk to me for a bit?'

'To be sure,' said Joe. 'I'm ever so glad, missie. Sit you down, missie, on this little chair, and I'll sit on this one, and we can talk as long as you please.'

Snowball felt quite rested now, and comforted. Her desire for cook's rich cakes, her frantic desire for naughtiness, her still more frantic desire to have that naughtiness cut out of her, her misery because she was in a mental fog and could not find her way out, all seemed to vanish in Blind

Joe's calm atmosphere. She rested her little head against his shoulder, and said in a low, purring sort of voice, 'Now I doesn't want anything more.'

Joe made no reply. It was given to him to have rare understanding, and he had a soothing effect on all people with whom he came in contact. He was without fear, for he had never seen the ugly, the fearful look that fear can bring into the human face. He could bear pain, because it had been his portion to endure suffering during the whole of his short life. He was not the least afraid of the dark, because he had never known it. Day and night alike were full of inward sunshine to him. He had a very quiet, very sustained, very unorthodox belief, and yet, perhaps, it was the most orthodox belief of all. He believed sincerely in the love of God. Not that he knew much about God; he believed in Him without knowing, that was all. In one sense there could not be a more absolutely ignorant boy; in another sense there could scarcely be a boy with more profound knowledge. He understood the vast difference, the immeasurable gulf, between good and evil. He had a natural repulsion to evil; he had a natural leaning to good. Therefore, the people who knew Blind Joe invariably loved him. It was difficult even for the roughest to be hard on the boy who could not see, and to those who knew better Joe was verily like an angel of light.

After Snowball had sat for some time very still,

resting all over, as she expressed it, with her head on Joe's shoulder, she raised that same head after her darting, impetuous fashion, and said, 'The fog 's gone!'

'Why, of course, missie,' said Blind Joe. 'It went, they told me, two or three days ago. We never have fog in the world when the trees are makin' music. They are makin' wonderful music to-night.'

'It was the inside fog I was speaking of,' said Snowball.

'I don't understand, missie dear.'

'But the house was full of it,' said Snowball. 'Wherever you went, it pressed up against you. I suppose it 's there still for the others, but it 's gone for me.'

She laid her head again confidingly on Joe's shoulder, and said, 'Nice old Joe! Dear old Joe!'

'Tell me a little more about the fog,' said Joe, who was rather puzzled about the child's words.

'Why, you see, it 's this way,' said Snowball. 'There 's a frightful lot of quiet upstairs. It 's quiet that I can't stand. I like noise, and people laughing. I 'd a lot rather scream than stay quiet. And everybody walks so hushed, and everybody speaks in whispers, and they all say something about Nora. I can't make it out.'

'Shall I tell you about it?' said Blind Joe.

'Perhaps you can 'xplain,' said Snowball. 'I think I wouldn't mind you 'xplaining. Muriel has

tried, and so has Patch, and so has Mrs Messager, and so has Great-uncle Michael. They didn't make anything but nonsense to me, the way they talked; but perhaps you'd know better.'

'Well, you see,' said Blind Joe in his very calm manner, 'I have, so to speak, gone through it.'

'Gone through the fog that gets inside of you?' said Snowball.

'That's about it, missie.'

'Well then, talk,' said Snowball. 'Tell me what you mean, and be quick.'

She spoke impetuously, but she began to tremble a little.

'Don't you remember,' said Joe, speaking slowly —he always did bring out his words with great deliberation—'what I told you about me and Agnes goin' outside the big church, and 'oldin' each other's 'ands?'

'Same as I'm holding your hand,' said Snowball.

'Yes, missie, and listenin',' continued Blind Joe, 'to the wonderful music—the music made by the voices and the music made by the organ. It rolled, sometimes, and thundered—as thunder comes when there's very 'eavy rain; and sometimes it sighed itself away almost to a whisper; and sometimes it seemed to go up and up and up, until it reached the very gates o' somewhere—I 'ear folks call it Heaven. Anyhow, the music went straight through my 'eart, missie, and through the 'eart o' Agnes; and, somehow, I never knew anythin' so beautiful.'

'Wish I could hear it!' said Snowball.

'You can, if you go to the same church. Maybe it won't mean the same to you, for Agnes used to tell me that she watched the folks a-comin' out —oh, how hard she stared at 'em!—and she said that some of 'em didn't look as if they'd heard anythin' at all; they was just talkin' to one another, and speakin' o' things that, anyhow, didn't mean music. Agnes and me used to wonder.'

'And your Agnes has gone away?'

'Yes, missie; yes.'

'Same as my Nora's going away,' said Snowball, speaking in a new voice, her face getting deadly pale, and large tears coming to her eyes.

'P'r'aps it'll be that sort o' way, missie.'

'Then I can't bear it, and I won't!' said Snowball.

She flung herself on the ground, and all the pent-up emotion within her little heart gave way. She cried as she had never cried before, with a new understanding illuminating her, with a new thought —terrible, wonderful, magnificent, grand, healing— coming over her. Joe went on his knees and lifted her up.

'You must stop cryin', missie dear,' he said. 'If you cry as loud as this some one may hear and come in; and I'd like to talk to you and tell you about Agnes.'

These words helped to stem the torrent of poor little Snowball's grief. She allowed Joe to

wipe her eyes, which he did with extreme tenderness, and then she said, 'Tell me more about Agnes.'

'We used to be wonnerful friends,' said Joe at once. 'We was always together, 'er and me; we didn't mind the cold ef we could sit side by side and 'old each other's 'ands. She used to say to me, "Poor Joe, you can't see!" and she used to laugh when I told 'er I could see better nor 'er, for I could see in the dark, and she couldn't. But still, she sort o' unnerstood, and very few other folks did that.'

'I understand,' said Snowball.

'Yes, missie; I think in some sort o' fashion you do.'

'Go on; tell me more about her,' said Snowball, with a great sob.

'Well, she took cold—same as your missie sister's took cold in that black, awful fog; and it settled 'ere'—Joe pointed to his chest—'and she—she was wery ill. They couldn't take 'er to the 'ospital, for there was a deal o' sickness about, and the 'ospital was quite full. So they let her die.'

'Die!—die!' said Snowball.

'I don't call it die,' said Joe; 'but any'ow other folks did. She stayed at 'ome, and I sat with 'er a lot, and two or three times a day the parish nurse come in and did what she could for 'er. But nothin' could keep 'er; and I think she was glad to go. One day she telled me that she knew

where she was goin'—and it's all wrote down in the Bible. I can't read the Bible. Can you read, missie?'

'Yes,' said Snowball; 'course I can.'

'Well,' continued Blind Joe, 'wherever she's gone, it's where music be; and nobody wants more than music to fill the 'eart—yes, up to the brim; and that bein' the case, I ain't one bit un'appy 'bout Agnes. For why should I be when she's so 'appy 'er little self? And if I was you, missie, I'd just think that missie upstairs, ef she does go away, is goin' to the land o' music.'

This was altogether a new idea for Snowball.

'Oh dear!' she said, 'I do feel sort o' puzzled. I wish I could find out something about the place where Nora is going. Couldn't you and me go there, Joe?'

'Not yet, missie; there's only one way to go, and that's real 'ard. It's only God can point the finger that way, and we can none o' us go till He points His finger.'

Snowball sat very still, reflecting quietly. The house seemed as though it would always be silent. Joe sat quite as still as Snowball; but after a time he got up, put his hand on the big book which lay in the middle of the table, and drew it towards Snowball.

'It's at the wery end o' the book,' he said, 'that you'll find the words. Maybe you'll read them aloud?'

Snowball opened the big Bible towards the last chapter.

'I know the words I want you to read to me,' said Blind Joe. 'It 's about tears. It begins, "God shall wipe away"'——

Snowball looked and looked. At last she uttered a little cry.

'I see it!' she said. 'It 's all right—it 's printed in the book, so it 's true. I don't like crying. Here it is: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain."'

She read the words slowly and with difficulty, for she was by no means an adept in the art of reading. Blind Joe nodded his head.

'That 's the place where Agnes is,' he said. 'There ain't nothin' to trouble anybody about one you love bein' in a place o' that sort.'

''Course not,' said Snowball. Then she added, a new reverent look coming into her little face, 'I s'pose you have to be very good to go there?'

'God can make you good if you try,' said Blind Joe.

'But how can I get God to make me good? I 's tried all sorts o' things, and I even wanted Great-uncle Michael to cut my naughtiness out with his cane.'

'You can't get rid o' it all in a minute,' said Blind Joe; 'but you can sort o' weaken it, and

when you 'ave weakened it, then it slowly dies. When all the naughtiness has died, seems to me that then there 's light; and God Himself—— Oh, I can't explain to you, missie, I know so very little; but'——

'Where 's God?' said Snowball in her emphatic voice.

'Up in Heaven, missie, and down here too.'

'No, He 's not. I don't see Him,' said Snowball. 'How can He help me to be good when He doesn't know that I want to be good?'

'I 'll ask Him this minute,' said Blind Joe.

Before Snowball quite knew what he was doing, he had dropped on his knees, and said aloud, 'Dear, kind God in Heaven, where Agnes is, help Snowball to be good. Take the wickedness out o' her'——

'Don't let it bubble up!' whispered Snowball, sobbing as she spoke.

'And, please, make other missie well,' continued Blind Joe.

'Yes, please,' echoed Snowball. 'Please, please, God; for I want us both to help each other to be good.'

Then she clasped Joe's hand and kissed him many times.

The children sat as still as possible, and by-and-by the blind boy and the little girl, tired out, and forgotten by others, fell asleep. Perhaps Joe dreamed in his sleep; but, if he did, Snowball was

too tired to dream. It was hours and hours before they awoke, and when they did Mrs Messager was standing over them.

'Oh! I was naughty,' said Snowball the minute she saw her; 'but I am going to be better. I *am* going to be better—always—for evermore! Amen.'

Snowball half-expected Mrs Messager to scold; but she didn't scold. She took Snowball's hands, and looked into her eyes, and then she bent forward and kissed her on her forehead. Then, to Joe's amazement, she did something he was never to forget—never, as long as he lived. She kissed him also.

'We are all so happy now,' she said, 'that we can't talk of naughtiness or anything else; for God has sent the beautiful, glorious Angel of Life into the house to-night.'

'I thought so,' said Blind Joe; 'seemed to feel that 'e were there, somehow.'

'And Nora will live,' continued Mrs Messager. 'The crisis is past; she is out of danger. Now, my dear child, you will be ill next if I don't look after you.—Joe dear, go to bed.—Snowball, I am going to take you upstairs to put you into your little, warm bed myself.'

Snowball held out her hand. She looked in a dazed way at Joe. As she was leaving the room she said, 'Good, for ever and ever, amen,' and then she walked soberly beside Mrs Messager up and up through the silent house.

They passed through a room in which Great-uncle Michael was sitting. He was sitting, very grave and still, looking into the fire. Snowball ran up to him and flung her arms round his neck.

'I'm changed!' she said. 'You didn't cut out the naughtiness; but God—God'—— She could not get any further; and, somehow, Uncle Michael did not need her to, for he swept his strong arms round her and kissed her as he had not kissed her before.

'We all have our faults; and we all need the help of Almighty God,' he said. 'I trust after this night I may be a better man to you and Nora than I have been. Go to bed, Snowball; go to bed and sleep.'

CHAPTER XIX.

A GOLDEN DAY.

IT is one of those certain things in life that summer follows winter. Just as surely as the days are short and the nights long, just as surely as the frost and the cold come, and the trees are bare of leaves and the flowers die, and black fogs visit poor, overcrowded, sooty London, so also the days grow longer, and the flowers come back, and the leaves reclothe the trees, and the sun shines on the land—so surely does warmth and genial weather follow nipping cold.

In the ordinary course of events these things took place for the young Messagers and the young Darrells, and during the following summer they all met once more in their old haunts. There was still the garden wall, and there was still the Moat House, and there was still the nice, cheerful, pleasant house where the Messagers used to live.

But, strange to say, although the houses remained, and the trees up which Nora used to swarm were laden with fruit and rich with green foliage, and the flowers—and roses in particular—grew in profusion everywhere, there were other very remarkable changes.

Great-uncle Michael was not at the Moat House.

He had, after grave consideration, decided to live abroad for a few years, and had in consequence given the Moat House to the Messagers for their special use during the entire summer. It was impossible for Mr Messager to be away from town so long, for he was, as Snowball expressed it, a Parliament-man, and had to spend hours and hours of his time making laws to turn people good.

Snowball was an enthusiast about goodness now. Her whole time was spent in seeking for goodness in out-of-the-way corners, amongst her playmates, and in her own little childish heart.

The Moat House, under Mrs Messager's management, was a most charming residence. Some of the old furniture was put out of sight, and some new, gay, cheerful, up-to-date furniture took its place; and there were plenty of servants to keep the dear old house in order, and there were several ponies and horses in the stables. Pat, who was promoted to be groom of the first rank, had a coachman over him and other servants under him; and Mrs Phelps came down from London and taught Snowball how to make cakes and all sorts of rich, delightful, spicy-smelling things. Pat worked in the stable and Tom worked in the garden—for the two gardens were practically thrown into one, as the house where the Messagers used to live, although no longer occupied by them, was not uninhabited. It was a brilliant scheme of Great-uncle Michael's, and it was carried out by

the aid of the children: the three Messagers and the four Scamps—not that they were often called Scamps now. The house in the Messagers' old garden was turned into a sort of farmhouse, where tired, sad London children might come down for a month at a time to get strong and well, and sniff the country air and enjoy the country sights. There was a matron to look after them, and a nurse to attend to the sickly ones, and other ladies to take care of those who were well enough to be out and about.

But it was the young Messagers and the young Darrells who really made life so fascinating to these children; the young Messagers and the young Darrells, always assisted by Blind Joe, who became now, so to speak, part and parcel of the family. For so dear had he become after that night when Nora Darrell lay at the point of death, and so good an influence had he over Snowball, that it was decided that he was to be brought up in the house where the Messagers used to live. Day after day he might be seen surrounded by small East End children—many of them the poor, the lame, and the maimed—who listened to his words because he knew them even better than did the other happy children who had never known poverty and distress.

Nora was still pale after her illness. Her convalescence had been very slow, and she had suffered much from great weakness and great

delicacy of the lungs. During these times no one comforted her more than Blind Joe, who used to come into her room when he got permission, and tell her stories about Agnes and the country where Agnes dwelt. Joe had made up a wonderful dream-story in his own heart about that dream-country. But, strange to say, he never spoke of it to any one except Snowball and Nora. They were his own special young ladies, and nobody ever took their place in the blind boy's heart.

There came a glorious day in midsummer when it was decided that the children from East London —numbering twenty—the four Darrells, and the three Messagers, with Miss Peters and Mr and Mrs Messager, were to have a picnic just on that spot where a long time ago now—or, at least, it seemed like a long time — Snowball had brought out Great-uncle Michael's best Wedgwood china, and had stolen cakes and jam from the housekeeper, and altogether disported herself naughtily.

The picnic was to be a grand success, and afterwards there was to be story-telling, and the London children were to lie in hammocks and tumble about on the grass, and swing in the tall trees, and have a glorious time.

Well, the day came, and the sun shone its very best, and all the anticipations of the little people were realised. There really did not seem to be any cross words spoken that day, and Snowball's

laugh was the loudest and the merriest, and not one London child of them all could turn somersaults as fast as she could, and not one London child of them all could swing as high or run with such speed. Led on by Joe, the London children made a sort of queen of Snowball. They said she was the most wonderful little girl in the world, and they decided amongst themselves to come back presently and give her a great surprise. The strangest pleasure of the whole thing was that the only way for the small Londoners to reach the Messagers and the Darrells was to get over the garden wall. Snowball had begged, and so had Nora, and so had Dandy and Roger, and so had the three Messagers, that this mode of exit and entrance should by no means be discontinued. To have a gate made in the wall would spoil all the fun; but the ladder—the dear old ladder!—the wonderful feeling of being on top of the wall, and the delicious sensation of going down the ladder on the other side, must not, could not, be relinquished.

'If it were given up I'd turn naughty again,' said Snowball. 'I really, truly a'most would.'

Well, the ladder was left, for Mrs Messager knew quite enough about young people to understand the feelings of the children, of whom she was now entirely mother, for Great-uncle Michael had acceded to her request, and had decided that

Nora and Snowball were to stay with her until they were grown-up.

'I believe,' he said just before he left England to go away to a distant land, 'that there is something fine about them both, and there is no doubt that little imp Snowball has improved. But I never could draw the goodness out of her; and as you can, madam, I must leave them to your care.'

'I will do my best,' said Mrs Messager, tears coming into her eyes; 'but as a matter of fact the person who really first discovered how to manage the children is that poor little East End boy, Blind Joe.'

'That,' said Great-uncle Michael, 'I do not believe. But have it your own way, my dear madam; have it your own way.'

He left, and Mrs Messager was in possession. And now that golden day about which I have been talking arrived. It came, it went, and the night set in. Snowball and Nora, with Patch and Muriel, were pacing up and down the broad walk which ran straight from the Moat House to the end of the long garden. After a time they divided, Nora and Muriel walking together, Patch and Snowball keeping behind.

'Well,' said Snowball, 'it's about a year since I first saw you, Patch—isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Patch.

'A year's a monstrous long time,' said Snowball.

'It is,' answered Patch.

Snowball looked round at her companion.

'I can't see you, 'cos it's dark,' she said. 'It doesn't matter to Joe whether it's dark or light; he always sees; he always has it light in his inside. But, Patch, I'd like awful to ask you a question.'

'Well, what is it?' said Patch.

'Does you think it's weakening?'

'What?' asked Patch.

'My wickedness. Is its roots shrivelling up a bit? That's what I want to know.'

'I am sure they are,' answered Patch. 'You are twice as nice as ever you were, Snowball; and I'll tell you what.'

'Yes?' said Snowball breathlessly.

'I do believe the best way to be good is not to think of ourselves at all.'

'But us *can't* help that,' answered Snowball. 'Us has *got* ourselves; us is in the very middle of ourselves. How *can* us forget?'

'Well, you do,' said Patch in a determined voice.

'I?' said Snowball in great astonishment.

'Of course,' continued Patch. 'What have you been doing all this livelong day?'

'Oh, helping,' said Snowball.

'Yes; but who? Yourself?'

'Well, I had to put my poor selfish self aside; it seemed hard, but I had to. There was *all* the children who came over the garden wall, and

darling Blind Joe, and Tom—dear Tom!—and Pat, and yourselves, and your father and mother, and Miss Peters. What time had I? Why, I was helping tea, and trying to amuse the whole long, long time.'

'But you were not unhappy,' said Patch.

'I didn't think whether I was happy or not,' said Snowball.

'Well, you were not a bit naughty, anyhow,' said Patch.

'Wasn't I?' said Snowball with great earnestness. 'Then the roots of naughtiness inside of me *must* be withering up.'

'I'll tell you why you were not naughty. 'Cause you had no time; you were thinking of all the other people.'

'That's true,' said Snowball. 'I was thinking of 'em like anything. Do you really think God helps people to think of other people, not of their own selves?'

'Of course He does.'

'Blind Joe says He is quite close to us. Joe says He's always near him.'

'Yes,' said Patch solemnly.

She held out her hand to Snowball, who grasped it. Snowball kept murmuring to herself, 'Good —for ever and evermore, amen.'

Meanwhile, Nora and Muriel were also talking one to the other.

'It's that Blind Joe,' said Nora. 'Do you know,

sometimes, Muriel, I don't like him a bit. That's when I feel vain and selfish, and—and not so dreadfully sorry that I went out in the fog.'

Muriel did not speak, and Nora continued: 'I think I do want to be a good girl, and to help other people; but I'll never do half nor quarter what Snowball will do in the world.'

'Mother says,' answered Muriel, 'that Snowball will be a splendid character by-and-by. She is so strong and so fearless, and the magnificent sort of way she tackles herself and keeps down her naughtiness astonishes us all.'

'She says it's God who helps her,' said Nora.

But just then, before the little girls could say another word each to the other, something funny and unexpected happened. There came a light on the top of the garden wall—a very little light, it is true, not much bigger than a glow-worm would make. But it was there, and it shone, not only on one dark little figure, but on two or three.

'What's that?' said Muriel.

Nora was silent, but felt much excited. Meanwhile, Snowball had clutched Patch so severely by the arm that the little girl half-screamed.

'What—what—what *is* happening?' exclaimed Snowball.

'Let's come and see,' answered Patch; and as this was quite the obvious thing to do, the two children ran as fast as ever they could in the direction of the ladder which stood against the

garden wall. Nora and Muriel quickly followed their example. By the time the dark figures on the top of the wall had come slowly down the ladder, guided by that rushlight gleam, they found two Messagers and two Scamps waiting to meet them.

'Why, it's Blind Joe his own self!' exclaimed Snowball in a voice of ecstasy.—'What do you want now, Joe?'

Joe was holding the little glow-worm light. Blind as he was, he managed to hold it quite steadily, and there were three or four children clustering round him. These children were called Flo and Jim and Betty and Connie. They were East End children. They had thin, peaked faces, and big, overshadowing brows, and little hands that were too small, and little feet that were rather tottery. But the eyes of the children gleamed with great excitement as Joe, making a magnificent bow, presented a letter to Snowball.

'It's for you, missie, and for you, Missie Nora, and for Miss Patch and Miss Muriel'——

'And also for the young gents,' said a voice at the back of the group.

'Will you read it now, missie,' said Blind Joe, 'and tell us at once whether you be agreeable or not?'

Snowball quite shivered with excitement. A letter presented to her in such a way and at such an hour! She was never a great reader, and to

read writing was beyond her. Besides, the light caused by Joe's little glow-worm lamp was not exceedingly strong. So the letter was handed to Patch, who first read its contents to herself and then read them aloud to the others:

'Blind Joe and the rest of the children of Palace Beautiful would be glad if Missie Snowball and Missie Nora, and all the other young ladies and gentlemen, and Mr and Mrs Messager, would come over the garden wall to a party given in their honour to-morrow. They 'opes that the young ladies and gentlemen, and the grand grown-up lady and gentleman, will forgive the liberty taken, and come their own selves. Hour named for the entertainment: seven o'clock in the evening. Please answer quick. We 's the deputation, and will take yes or no back to t' others.'

'Well, I never!' said Patch.

'It 's lovely!' exclaimed Snowball. 'But where are we to go, Blind Joe? What do you call the house?'

'Palace Beautiful,' exclaimed Joe at once. 'We found the name in *Pilgrim's Progress*, and it 's Palace Beautiful to all o' us, so it will be that name always as far as we children from East London can tell.'

'I think,' said Muriel after a pause, 'if the deputation will kindly wait just where they are, by the garden wall, I had better go into the house and tell father and mother what you expect us to

do; for we can't accept any invitation even from you, Joe, without their consent.'

Snowball made an impatient exclamation under her breath. She could not help saying, 'My wickedness isn't down; it's pushing itself up again. Down, down, you bad thing! You's got to be crushed out!'

She stood very firm, as was her invariable custom, and suddenly clutched hold of Joe's arm.

'Now I'm better,' she said with a great sigh.

Nora and Muriel, who had both gone to the house, were not absent very long. They returned with Mr and Mrs Messager.

'We are exceedingly obliged,' said Mr Messager, who had a very clear, penetrating, refined voice. 'I am exceedingly glad that I, for one, shall be able to accept your most kind invitation, my dear young people; for I am not obliged to go to London to-morrow.'

'No more laws being made! no more laws being made!' interrupted Snowball, springing up and down and keeping her hold of Joe's arm.

Mr Messager smiled, although the rush-like lantern could not show that he did so.

'We accept your kind invitation, young people, to Palace Beautiful to-morrow, and hope the day will be as fine as the one we have all just enjoyed at the Moat House.'

Joe bowed very low and said 'Thank you' in his best accents. The small East End children

behind him bobbed their curtsies, and then the little group of five turned and went slowly up the ladder and disappeared on the other side of the garden wall.

'It's quite 'licious!' said Snowball. 'Aren't they darlings? Think of them giving us a party!'

'It's Blind Joe who thought of it, of course,' said Nora.

'It's a very nice thought,' said Mr Messager. 'But now, my dear young folks, it is time for you all to go to bed, in order that you may truly enjoy whatever our young East End friends are providing for us to-morrow.'

'I wonder! I wonder!' said Snowball.—'Come along, Patch; come along! Good for evermore, amen. Can't help sometimes being sort of fussy and wishing I could burst out. My wickedness isn't dead, although I hope it's withering a little.'

'You fought it down; that was the great thing,' said Patch.

Then the children reached their rooms, and silence fell over the happy house, as silence had already fallen over the Palace Beautiful at the other side of the garden wall.

CHAPTER XX.

PALACE BEAUTIFUL.

NOW, to have two festivals on two days running was really enough to turn the heads and the hearts of most young people. It so happened that the rich children in the Moat House were much more excited about the feast which was to be given to them by the poor children in the Palace Beautiful than they had been about their own feast the day before. The whole of this wonderful new day was filled with remarkable events.

In the first place, Joe appeared at quite an early hour on the top of the garden wall. He stood there holding a little flag which consisted of a pocket-handkerchief fastened to the end of a long, crooked stick.

Jackdaw and Snowball rushed up to him.

'What do you want, Joe?' said Jackdaw.

'Please,' said Joe, 'will none o' the dear ladies and gents come over the garden wall to our side until seven o'clock this evenin'? We can't none o' us come to your side, and we want none o' you to come to ours.'

'Oh, mayn't I come, Joe?' said Snowball.

'No, missie,' replied Joe; 'you in particular mustn't dream o' comin'.'

Snowball stamped one foot very hard on the ground.

'Down! down!' she said to the naughtiness in her heart. Then she answered in a submissive voice, 'All right; I'm going to do some weeding.'

She had found her own panacea for naughtiness. It consisted in pulling up weeds in that particular ground which used to be known as The Wilderness. She generally grew quite calm in mind after she had toiled over this occupation for the space of five minutes; but so strong were her feelings on this occasion, and so angry was she just for a minute or two with Blind Joe, that she had to pull violently at the weeds for nearly ten minutes before she was composed.

Meanwhile, the excitement on the other side of the wall was something never to be forgotten by the little dwellers in cellars and attics—the little inhabitants of narrow, sunless streets, and rooms almost too hot to breathe in in the summer-time, and almost too cold to live in during the dark days of winter.

It was Joe, of course, who had first propounded the idea. He had collected all the children round him, and had made some remarkable statements. The consequence was that every one of the little East Enders had emptied their pockets for Joe's benefit, and had produced amongst them the not

inconsiderable sum of five shillings. Joe counted the money, and the small East Enders pressed close to him to see that he did it correctly. Then kind Nurse Fairfield, who was so good to the children, was asked to keep well out of the way, and the matron of Palace Beautiful was also requested not to interfere. This was the children's own festival, their own feast given by themselves, and it must be arranged and carried out in their own way. But there was one person they could consult. They had one valuable and very useful ally. This person was no less than Patch's friend, Tom the gardener's son.

Tom had grown very big during the year, and was now promoted to be under-gardener. He had a great deal to do, for he had to help not only to take care of the grounds at Palace Beautiful, but also the grounds surrounding the Moat House. The young East Enders regarded Tom as a full-grown man. They loved him next best to Snowball, who was an immense favourite with them all. Snowball came first in their affections, then Tom, then Patch. The older girls they could not get quite so much at home with; but Patch, Snowball, and Tom were indeed playmates worth knowing.

Tom, therefore, must be consulted, and Blind Joe took it upon himself early on that summer morning to cross the green, trimly kept lawn, and approach the spot where Tom was busy cutting the grass round the edge of one of the gravel walks.

'You keep out o' the reach o' my big shears, Blind Joe!' he called out when he heard the boy's footsteps.

Joe smiled in that grave way of his which made Tom think privately that Joe saw better than any of them. In one sense he was quite right, but that sense he knew nothing about.

'I heard your knife; I was nowhere near it,' said Blind Joe. 'Isn't it a lovely day?' he continued.

'There'll be a lot o' heat by-and-by,' said Tom. 'How be you all?'

'How are you?' said Joe in his polite way.

'Oh, I'm always chippy and lively,' replied Tom, 'now that my dear little Missie Patch is back, and the other ladies are well and 'earty. Wot more can I wish for?'

'You don't mind 'avin' us all down 'ere?' said Joe.

'Mind!' said Tom. 'Bless yer 'eart—no! I like it wunnerful, I do.'

'Tom, we want to consult you,' said Joe.

Tom glanced all over Blind Joe's upright figure. Although the boy was blind, he never stooped; he held himself very erect, and invariably gazed straight at the person he was speaking to as though he saw him quite well.

'There ain't much wrong with *your* eyes, young un,' exclaimed Tom.

'Oh no, Tom; no, nothin' at all,' said Joe. 'But I don't want to talk about myself now, please.

I want—we all want, we East End children who are so very 'appy at Palace Beautiful—we want to 'ave a surprise-party for dear Missie Snowball and the rest o' the young ladies and gents and Mr and Mrs Messager.'

'My word!' exclaimed Tom. He flung his shears aside, and stood up so as to be nearer to Joe. 'You ain't a little touched in the 'ead, be yer?' he said.

'I don't know wot you mean,' said Joe; 'but I feel all right.'

'Well, spunk up with your thoughts,' said Tom, 'for I 'as a lot to attend to. My word, I does work 'ard these days!'

'We 'll all help you to-morrow,' said Joe, 'if you will help us to-day.'

'Wery well, that's a bargain, ef so be my fayther don't mind.'

'I'm sure he won't; you must manage that somehow. Now, I'll tell you wot we want. We want dreadful, dreadful badly to have our surprise-party as nice as possible. We 've invited our friends to come over the garden wall at seven o'clock, and we want the party to take place just in front o' the 'ouse, where it will be pleasant and cool after the heat o' the day.'

'Well, that's put neat, anyhow,' said Tom. 'But wotever 'ull you do with 'em when you get 'em?'

'See here,' said Joe. 'We've collected amongst us five whole shillin's—that's sixty pence. We

could do somethin' with sixty pence, couldn't we?'

'My word!' said Tom.

'We don't want *you* to give any money,' continued Joe, 'only just to 'elp—to 'elp 'ard with your brain and your 'ands. We want you to 'elp us to make a throne.'

'A throne! Why, that's where kings sit.'

'And queens,' said Blind Joe.

'My word! Well, I s'pose I could manage that.'

'It must be a flower throne,' continued Blind Joe, 'flowers everywhere 'cept just on the seat, for they might be crushed by the person who sits in it; but flowers at the back and flowers round the side, and flowers hidin' the real throne, and makin' it fit—fit—— Oh, I can't say—I can't tell you just 'ow lovely I want the throne to be.'

'And you think you can do that for five shullin', bless yer?'

'We want to gather flowers from the garden 'ere,' said Joe, 'and some o' us 'll go on the common and get a lot o' ferns. We want to spend the five shillin's in somethin' else.'

'And wotever 's that?'

'I 've noticed,' said Blind Joe, 'that folks like the splendid sort o' folks who are comin' to our party to-night don't eat as much as us East End children, but they like things wery delicate and small. So I was thinkin' cakes—little cakes—and lemonade,

and sandwiches made with jam in the middle, would be the best sort for 'em to eat—that is, ef they want to eat. But the great thing o' all is the throne, and the choosin' o' the person to set on the throne, and the crown for the person to wear when the person sets on the throne. We 'ave to make our throne, and we 'ave to get our little cakes, and our sandwiches with jam in the middle, and our fizzy-fuzzy lemonade. We can do that with our five shillin's ef you 'll help us with the throne—and the crown.'

'That 's a 'cute idea,' said Tom. He hesitated for a minute. 'Who 'll set on the throne?' he said then.

'That 's our secret,' said Joe, suddenly retiring into himself.

Tom looked dubious. 'We each 'as our favourite,' he said. 'I know well you 're thinkin' o' Miss Snowball; but ef it was me to choose I 'd say Missie Patch.'

'It won't be done that way,' said Joe. 'It 'll be all done fair. You 'll know when the time comes. Now, will you 'elp us, or will you not?'

'I 'm your man,' said Tom.

He clasped Joe 's little hand in his, and Joe, in great ecstasy, pulled the money out of his pocket and transferred it to Tom's.

'We 'll manage fine,' said Tom. 'But this 'ull take some 'andlin', this will. A party given by you East Enders to the West Enders—my word,

that is 'cute! Yes, I'm your man, and it shall be done proper, too.'

'There 's one thing,' said Blind Joe very earnestly. 'There mustn't be one penny-piece—not one penny-piece—given towards our party 'cept by ourselves. You 'll promise, won't you, Tom?'

'Why, yes; wot do you mean?'

'You might be puttin' a shillin' on to our five shillin's, and gettin' more cakes and sandwiches and fizzy lemonade. That wouldn't do at all.'

'I did think o' it,' said Tom, colouring, although of course Joe couldn't see him; 'but I won't ef you don't wish it. It shall be yer own, every penny o' it. But at least you 'll trust me to see as the money goes as far as possible. Ef you 'll do that, I 'll promise you that five shullin' shall supply the feast, and not a penny—not a penny more.'

'Oh, that 's all right, and I 'm about the 'appiest boy in the world,' said Joe.

As soon as Joe had left him, Tom stood for a while leaning on his spade.

'I 'm jiggered!' he said once or twice to himself. Then, putting his garden implements carefully out of the way—for it was not safe to leave dangerous tools about with those prying, pushing, independent little East Enders everywhere—he strode up to the lodge, and entered it just as his mother was putting the breakfast on the table.

''Ere you be, Tom,' she said in a gratified voice, for she was immensely proud of her tall young

son, and thought nothing in the world too good for him. 'ʼOw early you got up this mornin', to be sure!' she continued. 'I ʼope you ain't overworkin' o' yourself; that ain't good for anybody.'

'Why—I, mother? I'm as fit as can be,' said Tom. 'But now, look 'ere. Where's faythe r?'

'I've a bit o' news for you,' said Mrs Price. 'Yer faythe r sent to tell yer that 'e'd be busy 'elpin' Mr Messager at the Moat 'Ouse the whole o' the day, and wouldn't be back until evenin'. 'E left some things for you to do, but said that you knew yer own work now so well that 'e needn't be bothered givin' too many directions.'

'Well, the fact is,' said Tom, 'I'd like to see faythe r, for I want to take a little 'oliday.'

'My word! Wot for?' said Mrs Price.

'That's my business,' said Tom. 'It's due to me; you know that, mother. Faythe r give me the choice o' 'olidays in the beginnin' o' the summer—two days I could 'ave when I pleased. Well, I choose to-day for one, and I'll send 'im a bit o' a note which you can manage to 'ave taken to 'im. 'E won't mind, ef there are one or two men weedin' and workin' as 'ard as they can in the north side o' the garden. I ain't wanted except to see to the waterin' later on. Anyhow, I mean to 'ave my 'oliday; so there's an end o' it.'

'Eat yer breakfast anyhow, now,' said Mrs Price, placing a goodly supply of hot tea and cold bacon and bread before Tom.

Tom set to work, while his mother watched him with growing admiration.

'Things 'ave turned rum,' she continued after a pause—'the 'ouse yonder filled with pore little East Enders, and the family goin' to live at the Moat 'Ouse.'

'Do you know, mother,' said Tom, raising his honest eyes, 'they 've given a wunnerful name o' their own to the 'ouse t' other end o' avenue.'

'Wotever's that? It was known as The Meadows,' said Mrs Price. 'There ain't a more respectable soundin' name for any 'ouse nor The Meadows, and I don't care who says to the contrary.'

'Well, they children are queer,' said Tom; 'and they 've named it—wot do you think?'

'Never was no good at guessin', Tom.'

'They 've called it,' said Tom, 'the Palace Beautiful.'

'My word!' said Mrs Price, starting back. 'That *is* rum! Sort o' pretty, though, pore little mites! I expect, Tom,' she continued after a pause, 'they finds the 'ouse quite wunnerful—the 'ouse and the grounds. I'm told by them as knows that most o' those pore little children live in underground cellars in London. It 's awful to think o' 'em—no better than rats in a 'ole.'

'It ain't quite so bad as that, mother; but, nevertheless, I 'm sure an' sartain they 've a bad time; and wot I 'm considerin' is this, that we want to give 'em a good time all we can.'

'Well, and sure enough they 'ave it,' said Mrs Price, 'runnin' wild everywhere, and sometimes frightenin' my cats and poultry almost a-past bearin'. The one I like is that blind boy. I'd do anythin' on earth for 'im. But, Tom, my son, to turn to other things—'owever will you water the plants ef you ain't in the place? Now, you tell me that.'

'But I will be in the place; I'll be there the greater part o' the day. Mother, do you think you could hold a secret, now?'

'Me!' said Mrs Price indignantly. 'Did I ever let out anythin' in the whole course o' my life?'

'Most women does,' said Tom.

'Well, I ain't one o' 'em gossipy, naggety sort! I keeps myself to myself; and if my own son don't know it, it's full time 'e's got to learn it.'

'I—I know it well enough, mother; I know we're safe with you.'

'We!' said Mrs Price in some alarm. 'Is there anybody else in the matter?'

'Let me see,' said Tom, contemplating. 'There is, I take it, about twenty-two folks for certain in this secret, and ef you're let into it, it'll bring the number up to twenty-three.'

'Oh, my word!' said Mrs Price.

'It's on account o' the secret that I want my 'oliday,' said Tom. 'And now, as there's no time to be lost, I'll just tell yer.'

Mrs Price was so excited that she flopped on the

nearest chair, and sat there, bending slightly forward, her fat hands on her fat knees.

'Don't keep me in suspense, Tom.'

'It's the rummest go,' said Tom. 'It's jest this. Palace Beautiful means to give a party to Moat 'Ouse.'

''Ow you do talk rubbish!' said Mrs Price.

'It's gospel true, mother. I expect it's the thought o' the blind boy. Any'ow, it's to be done, and done to-night, and neither the nurse nor the matron knows nothin' at all. They may come to the party, p'r'aps, but they're to 'ave no call to the makin' o' it; it's me and the young uns as'll do that. And the best o' all is this, mother—the best and the queerest and the most choky, teary sort o' thing as 'ud bring a lump to yer throat—them pore little East Enders 'as collected five shullin' among 'em to buy food for the supper for, so to speak, the aristocracy—not for theirselves, mind you, but for the gentry from t' other side o' the wall. Blind Joe has given me the money, and we're not to spend another penny-piece, says 'e; it's to be all the East Enders' own party, says 'e; sandwiches with jam in the middle, says 'e, and little cakes, and lemonade. Well, mother, 'ere's the money, and you make the best you can out o' it. There ain't a better cook in the length and breadth o' the land, and ef you make the sandwiches, and cut 'em up small and genteel, and make 'em look pretty as you knows 'ow, and make the

fuzzy lemonade and the little cakes—why, you 'll be doin' your share. But you must promise me, woman true, not to add one farthin'-piece o' yer own to this 'ere feast.'

'Well,' said Mrs Price—'well, I never! The pore little kids with their very own money! I am took all o' a heap, that I am.'

'Wull yer do it, or wull yer not, mother? That 's the question to be answered.'

'I 'll do my wery best. Yes, and they sha'n't be ashamed on it, pore little things; only I would like one thing, and that is, to come up and see the goin's on presently.'

'I 'll manage that for you,' said Tom. 'Didn't I say as you was the best mother in the length and breadth o' the land?'

He gave his mother a hasty smack on the cheek, told her to let his father know that he meant to be off duty that day except in the matter of watering the plants, and then hurried down the avenue to Palace Beautiful.

CHAPTER XXI.

PREPARING THE FESTIVAL.

WHEN Mrs Price was left alone she stayed quite still for a minute or two; then, pulling herself together, so to speak, she proceeded to rummage in a deep drawer in a dresser at the back of the kitchen. She took from within a lot of coloured paper, pink and blue and violet, also bright yellow and a sort of lemon-colour. She looked attentively at these papers, and put on, as she expressed it, her considering-cap. While she was so doing the latch of the kitchen door was raised, and a tall, ungainly girl came in.

'You're late as late can be, Betsy Jane,' said Mrs Price, turning sharply to the girl. 'Ain't you ashamed o' yerself to keep yer betters waitin' like this?'

The girl, who was known in the village as Mrs Price's help, bobbed an awkward curtsy and made some sort of excuse. She had been up late the night before, and she ''oped as Mrs Price would forgive 'er.'

'Ef yer look sharp and slippy now,' said Mrs Price, 'I'll do my best to cultivate a forgivin' spirit; but I tell yer wot's the very first thing

I want. It 's this. You 've got to run round—not by the garden wall, mind you; that way 's private—but to run round by the road to the Moat 'Ouse, and find Price 'is own self, and tell 'im that Tom 's takin' 'oliday to-day, and that it 's all right. You say nothin' more than that, and then come back as quick as you please.'

The girl darted away, being exceedingly glad to get out of Mrs Price's presence while that good lady, as she called her mistress, was in a bad temper. There was no doubt that Mrs Price was a quick-tempered woman, but her flashes of anger were always short-lived, and she soon forgot Betsy Jane in contemplating how she could make five shillings produce enough cakes and sandwiches and lemonade for a party of very nearly thirty people; 'for sure as sure,' she said to herself, 'the pore little East Enders must 'ave a bite each, 'owever crotchety it is to manage. Now, I don't want to 'ave that Betsy gapin' round and wonderin' wot I 'm after. I 've sent 'er out o' the way on purpose. It 's me who 'as to make the feast for to-night, and mighty little money I 'as to make it with, and not a penny nor a farthin' am I to give towards it. But I suppose this paper—which is sheer rubbish, no less—won't be considered money. It 'll 'elp to make the things look pretty and in West End style. Bless their little 'earts! I 'll 'elp 'em—so I will.'

While Mrs Price was cogitating she was by no

means idle. She had turned on the right damper so as to make the oven hot in her little stove.

'I won't charge 'em for this,' she thought. 'They 'll never think o' this when they 're dealin' out their feast.'

She then put on her bonnet, tying it comfortably under her fat chin, and pinned a light shawl round her shoulders, for the day was very warm. She started off to the village, and purchased for the five shillings (such a bundle of pennies and halfpennies and farthings it was!) the different things she wanted. She managed by a judicious word here and a judicious word there to get the different articles for the feast, so to speak, at cost price. Without betraying her secret in the least, she yet managed to convey that there was a secret of immense importance in the air, and that she was entrusted with the spending of this money. It must, she informed the shopkeepers, 'stretch itself' to do its full duty. The shopkeepers were all extremely good-natured; and as Mrs Price was a prime favourite, and they had an immense amount of custom both from the Moat House and the newly christened Palace Beautiful, they did what she required.

She came back, therefore, laden with flour, currants, raisins, sugar, and milk; besides these things she had eggs, butter, a big pot of jam, a large loaf of bread, &c. When she got back to the cottage, Betsy was there before her.

'Now then, Betsy Jane,' she said—for the young person in question boasted of both these names—'you look sharp and see after your work, and don't bother me. I've a power o' cookin' to get through this mornin'.'

Betsy Jane was full of curiosity, but she never dared to question Mrs Price. So Mrs Price made innumerable tiny cakes from first-rate recipes. She made them in all sorts of fanciful shapes, cutting some to represent lozenges, and others to look like wheels, and others again to represent birds—cocks and hens, and even chickens. She put her cakes into a hot oven, and when they were done to a turn she took them out and sprinkled icing on some, and what she called 'hundreds and thousands' on others. Hundreds and thousands are, as all housekeepers know, tiny sweets of different colours, which make the outside of what they adorn very taking indeed.

There were quantities of these cakes all ready before Tom came back to his early dinner. His mother took him into the pantry, and, lifting a snowy-white cloth from her great tray full of confections, showed him what she had done. He fell back in astonishment.

'My word! my word!' he said two or three times. Then he turned to his mother, anger blazing in his honest gray eyes. 'You've added to the money, mother! You never could by no

manner o' means get those cakes for five shullin'.'

'Ef you doubt your mother you 'ad best go away without yer dinner,' was Mrs Price's response. 'When I say a thing I mean it, and no livin' soul 'as spent money on these 'ere cakes but the little East Enders at Palace Beautiful.'

Tom felt quite ashamed, as he well might, and ate his dinner in silence. Towards the end of it, however, he burst out into fresh admiration of the marvellous cakes.

'They 're past anythin', and that 's the solemn truth,' he said once or twice under his breath. 'Now then, mother, I must be off. But at 'alf-past five I 'll come down with a big basket, and one or two o' the East Enders, and ef you don't get an invitation to see wot 's goin' on my name ain't Tom Price.'

Mrs Price kissed him and told him to go and be quick. Immediately after dinner she made her sandwiches. She was an adept at this sort of thing; and more dainty sandwiches—some made with jam in the middle and others with hard-boiled eggs—had seldom been seen even at the grand feasts where West Enders overfed themselves in London town. The lemonade followed next; after which there was a great deal to be done in the way of covering common delft plates with nicely embossed paper of pink, green, and different colours.

At last all was in readiness. Mrs Price's tiny pantry was full of wonderful things, and she only waited for Tom and his colleagues to arrive.

Meanwhile, the excitement amongst the East Enders was really reaching such an extreme pitch that if it did not come to an end before long there might be serious catastrophes. It is true that Tom quite kept his head; so did Blind Joe. Whenever had Blind Joe been known to be put out or disturbed about anything? But the little East Enders themselves—it was difficult for them to keep quiet and not to let the secret out to Nurse Fairfield and the matron. If it had not been for the extreme tact of these two kind people there would have been no secret for the children to keep. But they were wise enough to know when they were best out of the way, so out of the way they kept.

Amongst the special East Enders who were now residing for a whole glorious three weeks at Palace Beautiful was a tall girl who went by the name of Magenta Anne. Nobody ever dared to call her anything else. Plain Magenta would have caused her to become crimson with fury, and to knock the audacious person who had dared to clip her name to the ground; Anne would have led to worse consequences. Therefore Magenta Anne she was called by every one. In her own way she was a person of quite as great character as Snowball or Patch. She was a big, heavily

made girl, with unkempt, dark hair, which was always tumbling about her eyes. She had a slightly furtive expression on her face. Her mouth was large and a little crooked. She had big, brawny arms and large, square shoulders, and gave promise of being by-and-by a sort of terror in her neighbourhood.

The lady who, under Mrs Messager's directions, had selected Magenta Anne to pay a visit to Palace Beautiful had been exceedingly doubtful when she made the experiment. The rest of the little East Enders were gentle and, considering their bringing up, quite sweet. But Magenta Anne had a furious temper, had no regard for anybody's feelings, and up to the present showed little or no gratitude. She was, in fact, the one thorn in the rose of this perfect day. She objected to everything that was proposed, and made herself, in short, intensely disagreeable. If all the other little East Enders had selected her to rule the feast, to arrange the food, to deck the throne, it is possible she might have been good-humoured; but as things were managed she was decidedly cross. She had, however, a strong admiration for Tom, and it was Tom who in the end decided to tackle her. He took Blind Joe aside and told him so.

'We're all as right as ever we can be,' he said, 'and the feast 'll be somethin' elegant. Not a penny-piece, not a farthin's worth that ain't been bought

by yer own selves; and my mother, the best o' all good women, 'as undertook the cookin' and makin' o' the different things. My word, there will be a spread! Mr and Mrs Messager never tasted nothin' finer than the feast yer about to give 'em.'

Joe's pale face shone. He clasped Tom's big, sturdy arm, and said, 'Ain't it jest too lovely!'

'But I'll tell yer wot,' said Tom. 'With that spitfire about'——

'Wot spitfire?' said Joe.

'Magenta Anne. We must manage her, or she 'll spoil everythin'.'

Joe gave a very gentle sigh. 'I know,' he said. 'She don't seem to get the real comfort out o' the place. The fact is,' he added after a pause, ''tain't Palace Beautiful at all to poor Magenta Anne. That 's why she 's so miserable.'

'I don't see a trace o' misery,' said Tom; 'but I see a fine growth o' downright wickedness.'

'Oh, but they 're the same,' said Joe in his gentle voice.

'You 're a queer un,' said Tom. 'Now then, I tell yer wot. Magenta Anne ain't goin' to spoil this feast. I 'll settle 'er.'

'Very well,' said Joe.

Joe and Tom now approached the front of the old house. It really did look sweet. Little chairs and benches were scattered here and there, but the most delightful part of the entertainment was the great throne in the centre. This was raised on a

small table, and hassocks of different heights were placed below so as to form steps to the throne. The whole erection was then completely covered with evergreens and flowers. It was a remarkable throne, and had a sweet scent, because there was so much honeysuckle twining round it, and such a quantity of red and yellow rambler roses, besides other roses of all sorts and descriptions, peeping out everywhere. The seat of the throne was completely covered with moss, green as emerald and soft as down, and the back of the throne was a nest of ferns, so that the queen who was eventually to sit on that throne would find herself in quite the most comfortable seat in the world. Hanging over one of the arms of the throne was a crown made entirely of white lilies, and this had been the work of some of the small East Enders. They knew something about the making of artificial flowers, and had helped to put wreaths together, young as they were, for some of the West End shops. They now showed considerable ability in handling real flowers, so the lily crown was quite ready for the lily-queen whenever she was chosen.

But Magenta Anne's spiteful face and unpleasant manners caused more than one of the children to sink into his or her self in a state of fear.

Magenta Anne, during the time that Joe and Tom had been consulting together, had crept up behind Flo (a sweet little girl of seven years of age) and Connie, her special friend and companion

(a girl with a pale face and great dark eyes, and a limp whenever she walked, for one of her poor little legs was shorter than the other). They had been busily engaged making wreaths of all sorts and descriptions; for each child of all the East Enders was to wear a tiny wreath of flowers that evening. Magenta had upset the flowers in a great heap, and then she began pushing them about with her big, coarse hands and laughing at the children.

'My word!' she said, 'I am more sorry than I can say that I've parted with my 'alfpenny. They wanted me to give more, but I was too 'cute for them. You're little fools, all o' yer, makin' up to the gentry as ef they 'adn't more o' the good things every day o' their lives than anybody.'

As she said this she gave a vicious tug at Flo's fair hair and pinched Connie's arm. The two little girls did not dare to cry out, for if they did Magenta Anne would punish them by-and-by. But it was big, stalwart Tom who now marched into their midst.

'I say,' he exclaimed, 'aren't you makin' them wreaths as cunnin' as anythin' I ever looked at! Ain't they jest beautiful!'

'I don't think so,' said Magenta Anne.

Tom looked full at her, and she found herself colouring.

'You come 'long with me for a minute,' he said. 'I want yer to 'elp me particular bad.'

'Me!' said Magenta Anne in some surprise.

'You, and no one else. Come, Genty, do.'

'I ain't Genty! I am Magenta Anne.'

'You ain't nothin' but Genty to me. I can't be bothered with that long, ugly name o' yourn.'

'Ugly name yerself!' shouted Magenta Anne, preparing to give Tom a sound box on the ear. He caught her hand as she was in the act, and raising it, putting it on his arm, and saying, 'Come 'long, Genty,' pulled her down a side-walk. The other children looked on both with fear and relief. What was Tom going to do?

Magenta Anne and Tom walked on for a long way, and when they found themselves quite alone, Tom took a piece of whipcord and proceeded to tie Magenta Anne's wrists strongly together. With some more whipcord he fastened her to a tree. Having secured her there in such a manner that she could not possibly free herself, he went on talking to her.

'I don't know whether yer believe in fairies or not,' he said.

Now, Magenta Anne, like many other children in her station, had a queer sort of belief in fairies. She looked at Tom with growing wonder. His strength and resolution won her respect. She was not angry with him for tying her to the tree. She could not herself understand why this was the case.

'Wull, look you 'ere,' said Tom. 'You can do two things, and you 'a got to choose.'

'I'll do jest wotever I like,' said Magenta Anne.

'Not a bit o' it!' said Tom; ''cos yer in my power.'

'No, I ain't!'

'Yes, yer be. I can keep yer tied to that 'ere tree until the feast is over. I can act bad, ugly fairy to yer—jest wotever I pleases I can do.'

'But I 'd scream,' said Magenta Anne.

'You could please yourself 'bout that, but not a livin' soul 'u'd 'ear yer. This place is too far from the 'ouse.'

Magenta Anne considered this probable, and did not particularly like the situation.

'Wull,' he said after a time, 'wot d'yer want? I leave it to you to choose. Either you stay 'ere tied to this 'ere tree—no way 'urt, mind yer, but yer 'd be simply out o' the way o' mischief—and not able to loose yerself, was yer to try ever so 'ard, for I learnt the knot I 'as put round your wrist from a sailor chap, and the cord 's strong, and yer can't raise yer 'and to cut it with yer teeth. And ef I choose, I can tie yer feet as well. This place is lonely; no one ever comes along—there ain't no call to. Wull, 'ere you stay till the feast be over, and not a livin' soul 'ull miss yer.'

''Ow I '*ate* yer!' said Magenta Anne.

'That don't matter at all, Genty,' said Tom. 'I 'd jest as lief yer 'ated me as loved me—rather better, I think, too.'

'Oh, my!' said Magenta Anne. 'Ain't yer a cruel boy!'

'No, I ain't. It's you that's a disgrace to Palace Beautiful. I 'ad my eyes on yer, and I knew perfectly well that yer 'ad money in yer pocket, and that yer wouldn't give it to the feast. You 'ave only given one 'alfpenny, whereas all the others 'as given thruppence, and sexpence some o' 'em; and you want to stand there and get the credit jest like the others. You 'as nothin' to do with our feast. Wot's a 'alfpenny? I'll give it back to yer this minute; yer can put it in yer pocket with the other money as yer's savin' up. Oh, my! you're a nice sort!'

All of a sudden Magenta Anne began to cry. She was not so very old after all, and somehow Tom frightened her, and she was quite clever enough to see that he was in earnest. He would leave her tied to a tree in this lonely place until the feast was over unless she repented. He was looking at her now with such a queer expression on his face, and as he looked he folded his great strong arms across his broad chest and drew himself up, and seemed to poor Magenta Anne to be altogether a man.

'Wull,' she said after a pause, 'you ha' spoke o' two things. You'll tie me to a tree ef I'm bad. Wot 'ull yer do ef I'm good?'

'Ah, that sounds somehow better,' said Tom, his voice softening imperceptibly. 'First of all, we'll

'Oh, my!' said Magenta Anne. 'Ain't yer a cruel boy!'

S. F. PAGE 306.

jest see for our own selves wot money you 'ave in yer pocket.'

Magenta Anne uttered a scream, but Tom did not take the slightest notice of it. He proceeded to investigate her pocket, which, indeed, contained a couple of shillings and some pence. Tom had his own suspicion that Magenta Anne had not come rightly by this money, but had gleaned it—she alone knew how—from the pockets of some of the other little girls.

'Sexpence I must 'ave,' he said. 'Take back yer dirty 'alfpence. Give me sexpence ef yer mean to be good.'

Magenta Anne squirmed and turned her face aside, and struggled just as hard as poor Snowball had ever struggled. But Tom conquered her with his masterful eyes, and presently she nodded her head and said in a choked voice, 'Take it.'

'That's better,' said Tom. 'Now you ha' done yer share.'

He put sixpence into his pocket, and returned the rest of the money to Magenta Anne, and then said, 'You'll be under me to-night. The field-general o' this feast is Blind Joe; the second in command is me, Tom Price, and you're my orderly.'

'Wot on earth 's that?' said Magenta Anne.

'It's a name as belongs to the harmy, Genty,' said Tom in a smiling voice; 'and I'll jest tell yer wot: an orderly means that he's the sort o' person

as 'as to obey 'is chief wotever 'e tells 'im. I'll keep my eye on yer; no pinchin' o' the little gels, no pullin' their 'air, no upsettin' baskets o' flowers, no stealin' cakes and good things from the refreshment-booth when we make it up. You do exactly wot I tell yer, and keep alongside o' me; and ef yer don't it won't take me a blessed minute to bring yer back again to this 'ere tree and tie you up for the rest o' the night. Now, isn't it a bargain, Genty? Don't yer think yer'll be a sight 'appier 'elpin' me, and with a badge on yer shoulder to show that you're my orderly, than tied up 'ere?'

'I—I think I would, Tom.'

'That's right; I thought as much. Now, no skulkin', mind; and no turnin' traitor. You're one o' the party wot is givin' the feast, and you must uphold yer dignity wotever happens.'

As Tom spoke he swiftly unfastened the cords which had bound Magenta Anne to the tree. He took the cords also off her wrists, and chafed them a little with his own strong hands after doing so.

'You belong to me for to-night,' said Tom, 'so come along, and let's be quick.'

Magenta Anne trotted after him just like a spaniel. No other treatment could have produced a similar result. The children, when they saw the two returning, felt a sudden lightness of heart. Whether Magenta Anne's goodness would continue or not, she would be all right at least for that night.

Tom kept shouting to her, moment after moment, 'Genty, come here!' 'Genty, look sharp!' 'Mind where yer treadin', Genty!'

She was really so busy that she had no time at all to think of herself. But by-and-by the crucial moment did arrive. It was Tom and Blind Joe and Tom's orderly, Magenta Anne, who went down the long avenue to fetch the wonderful sweetmeats which were provided for the feast. Magenta Anne had already had five minutes to spare in her own bedroom. This she spent in decorating herself with every scrap of finery she possessed. Her costume left much to be desired; but she considered it most elegant. She tied her back-hair into a knot at the top of her head with a bright yellow ribbon. She wore an old brown-and-yellow-striped petticoat which had belonged to her mother, and a many-coloured blouse that had been purchased for her at a pawnshop. She washed her face and hands, and was at last thoroughly pleased with herself.

As she went downstairs she avoided looking at the other little girls. She went straight up to Tom and said, 'Now I'm ready.'

'Right yer be,' said Tom.

Off they started to Mrs Price's cottage, and back they presently returned with the wonderful sweetmeats, Tom conveying them on a barrow which he had fetched for the purpose. How delicious those cakes smelt! How wonderful were those great

jugs of lemonade! The lemonade was too precious to be trusted on the barrow, so Magenta Anne had to carry one jug and Blind Joe another. But Tom insisted on his orderly going on a little before him, so she had no chance to sample the contents, which, it is to be regretted, she certainly would have done under ordinary circumstances. Then the pretty refreshment-bar, or booth, as the children preferred to call it, was decked with those ravishing cakes and those piles of sandwiches; and beautiful glasses and plates and spoons were also provided. As to Mrs Price's marvellous dishes which held the said cakes and sandwiches, the children thought they had never seen anything quite so elegant in the whole course of their lives.

'Time's gettin' on,' said Tom. 'Look chippy, Genty; don't waste the minutes!'

The final arrangements were now to be made, for the clock in the old hall was on the stroke of seven, so the children, every one of the whole twenty-three, including Tom, put on their wreaths, made mostly of wild flowers; and Tom fastened a badge made of blue and scarlet and gold on Magenta Anne's left shoulder, which badge he informed the other children was her badge of honour, as she was under him, his chosen assistant for the rest of the evening.

It was arranged that seven of the children, including Blind Joe, Tom, Magenta Anne, Connie, Flo, Betty, and Jim, were to go down the garden

straight to the ladder which led over the wall; and steadily, very steadily, they were to mount the ladder, and, each holding a little flag which had been prepared during the course of the day, were to await the arrival of their distinguished guests.

When the guests appeared at the foot of the ladder, the party from Palace Beautiful were quickly to descend and wait for them on the farther side. They were then, so to speak, to surround them and lead them up to that part of the garden where the feast was spread.

This was the programme, invented mostly by Blind Joe, but carried out faithfully by Tom, who now found Magenta Anne an exceedingly admirable aide-de-camp.

CHAPTER XXII.

WEST END AND EAST END CLASP HANDS.

IT was altogether a wonderful thought! It was a secret which did credit to the twenty-three young people who had carefully planned it out and thought of it. Even Magenta Anne was now in the thick of the secret, and gave her aid quite willingly. But was there ever, ever in the annals of history a secret known to twenty-three people that was not soon known to many more? The secret began to stir itself, to whisper about itself, to—so to speak—grow, to edge itself out a little here and a little there, until quite a crowd of people from the village, to whom Mrs Price swore she had never said a single word, began to creep up the avenue by twos and threes, and to stand about in the shade and look on. Perhaps Betsy Jane had spread the rumour of those delicious cakes, and perhaps Mrs Price, without absolutely meaning it, had let out more than she intended when she spoke of five shillings stretching itself that morning.

Tom had insisted on paying sixpence for the coloured paper, for he respected Blind Joe's determination that the feast should cost no one a single farthing but themselves.

Yes, all was ready; and Mrs Messager found herself standing near her neighbours, and the neighbours looked at the little East Enders, each one very shiny about the face and very much plastered about the hair, and each one wearing his or her very, very best Sunday-go-to-meeting frock or coat, as the case might be. And if the village folk thought that the little children from East London looked happy, the little children with their radiant eyes gazed back at the village folk as though they were so many wonderful good fairies come to help them to celebrate their feast.

But the moment of triumph arrived when, dressed simply all in white, Snowball, Patch, Nora, and Muriel, accompanied by the three boys, also in their best clothes, and Mr and Mrs Messager bringing up the group, walked very slowly towards the scene of the festival. Then did all the little East Enders feel a great swelling in their hearts—such a great swelling that they could do nothing but cry, 'Hip, hip, hurrah! hip, hip, hurrah!' and of course the inevitable thing followed; for the Messagers and the Scamp Family cried 'Hip, hip, hurrah!' too in loud and hearty tones, and little East End hands clasped West End hands, and the children of the rich and the poor came very close together. There was a full moment's pause before any one spoke, for the guests would not, of course, dream of taking the lead in anything connected with such a marvellous feast as this.

Then Blind Joe came forward with that easy grace which always characterised his movements. He had never known fear, and he had never known awkwardness; for can the blind, those blind people who have the marvellous inner sight, have anything to do with the cares and anxieties and fears of ordinary mortals? The boy, with his marvellous sense of touch, knew exactly where to stand, and, drawing himself up, he pushed back the hair from his pale face and made his little speech.

'We all wanted to do this,' said Blind Joe, 'just to show our great, our wery great friends that we are—sort o' full o' love for them.'

'Oh! oh!' gasped Snowball, turning to Patch at this moment, 'if Blind Joe says much more I'll burst out crying for pure joy.'

'You mustn't, Snowball,' whispered Patch back, 'for that would hurt him just awfully.'

'And,' continued Joe, who had waited until this whispering had died away, 'we wanted to tell in our own way what our love is like, and we wanted to say to the dear missies here, and the dear young masters, and the dear lady and gentleman who do so much for us, that when we go back to London town we will never, never forget Palace Beautiful. The thought o' it 'll 'elp us through the dark days, and the sad days, and the hungry days.'

'Yes, yes! that's it! that's it!' shouted all the others; and even Magenta Anne felt that the occasion was a touching one.

'Keep along o' me, and be ready when I say "March!"' whispered Tom to her.

'And now to begin. First o' all,' said Blind Joe, 'we want each o' us 'ere to choose some one to 'elp us when we go back to London town.'

There was a little start of surprise when Joe made this remark. The visitors looked very attentive, and the village folk came two or three steps nearer.

'Fact is,' said Joe, 'we want a queen over us. We'd rather have a queen than a king; and we want the queen to 'ave a maid o' honour as'll always do wot the queen wishes. We want, when we're away far from this beautiful house and this lovely country, to think o' our queen and to do wot she wishes, and we 'opes perhaps that she'll write to us now and then, and 'elp to make us better.'

'Oh! oh!' said the four girls—the Messagers and the Scamps—under their breath.

'Oh, it's beautiful!' said Nora.

'I'm thinkin', perhaps,' continued Blind Joe, 'that afore we begin our feast, which 'as caused us such wonderful 'appiness, we 'ad best choose the queen. We'll each o' us go forward and touch the lady we love, and the lady who gets the most touches will be the queen to help us when we're back in London town; and the lady who gets the second number o' touches will be the maid o' honour. That's all,' said Joe, suddenly changing

his attitude; 'and I am going to touch my lady.'

Up he went without an instant's hesitation and laid his hand on Snowball's shoulder. One by one the rest of the children followed his example, some of them touching Nora, who looked so fair and so beautiful, and so like a real queen, some touching Muriel, and others again touching Patch. Meanwhile, Mr Messager took careful count of the numbers of children who selected from amongst the four girls. He wrote down the numbers on a piece of paper, and when the little competition came to an end there was a general shout, for Snowball came first.

Yes, Snowball was queen of the East End children, and next to her in the number of votes was Patch, who was therefore Snowball's maid of honour, and was practically very nearly as great as the queen herself. Poor little Snowball turned scarlet when she found that the honour was hers; but Joe held out his hand, and took her hand and led her up to the steps of the throne.

'Oh missie!' he said, 'won't we all try to be good for your sake?'

Patch followed immediately afterwards, and when Snowball seated herself on the throne Patch stood near her. Then a crown of lilies, pure and white and lovely, decorated Snowball's head, and a crown of roses found its way to Patch.

By this time the excitement had reached such

a pitch that the neighbours from the village could scarcely contain themselves.

'Long live Miss Snowball!' they cried, and 'Long live darling Miss Patch!' and the East End children very nearly got into disorder, and out of the careful training which Tom and Blind Joe had got them into, in their desire to testify their joy on the coronation of their new queen.

One thing perhaps slightly untoward did happen; for Magenta Anne, bursting all bounds, rushed up to Snowball, fell on her knees before the throne, took Snowball's hand, and said, 'I'm a real bad un, I be; but I'll try to be good for you.'

Tom called out, 'Genty, come here!' in majestic voice, and Magenta Anne had to retire into the background.

Then came a time of pure festival, when everybody enjoyed himself or herself to heart's content. The food was praised as the most delicious the Scamp Family and the Messagers had ever tasted; and when afterwards Mrs Messager sat down and took a number of little East End girls in her lap and cuddled them and kissed them and blessed them, and Mr Messager went in and out amongst the boys and got at their story—oh, what a time it was, and what merry games they all played, and how fast the moments flew!

But as all lovely things come to an end, so did the East Enders' feast. Perhaps, however, the

most beautiful thing of all came just at the very end, when Snowball, after a whispered word with Mr Messager, mounted the steps of her throne and said:

'Please, I am glad that I'm going to be your queen; but, please, Blind Joe isn't going back to London town. He is going to live on here and be taught all sorts of wonderful things, and he is to help the other East End children when they come to Palace Beautiful. And, please, I want to know where you all live, so that I may write to you all at Christmas-time; and I want you all to write to me, your queen, whenever you are sorry or hurt or glad or—or want me in any way. And, please, Mr Messager says that you are all, every one of you, to come back here again for three weeks next summer. Oh, I am glad I am your queen!' continued Snowball; 'and—and,' she added, 'I love you all.'

THE END.

Edinburgh:
Printed by W. & R. Chambers, Limited.

BOOKS FOR GIRLS

By May Baldwin.

MYSIE: A Highland Lassie.....5/-
With Eight Illustrations by A. S. Boyd.

PEG'S ADVENTURES IN PARIS.....5/-
With Eight Illustrations by W. Rainey.

THE SUNSET ROCK.....5/-
With Eight Illustrations by Harold Copping.

THE FOLLIES OF FIFI.....3/6
With Six Illustrations by A. S. Boyd.

DORA: A High School Girl.....3/6
With Six Illustrations by Mabel L. Attwell.

THE GIRLS OF ST GABRIEL'S.....3/6
With Six Illustrations by Percy Tarrant.

THAT AWFUL LITTLE BROTHER.....3/6
With Six Illustrations by Chas. Pears.

SIBYL; or, Old School Friends.....3/6
With Six Illustrations by W. Rainey.

A PLUCKY GIRL; or, The Adventures of 'Miss Nell.'..3/6
With Six Illustrations by Jessie Macgregor.

A POPULAR GIRL; or, Boarding School Days.....3/6
With Six Illustrations by Jessie Wilson.

THAT LITTLE LIMB.....2/-
With Four Illustrations by Mabel L. Attwell.

W. & R. Chambers, Limited, London and Edinburgh.